

**AFTER THE NEW LEFT: U.S. CULTURAL RADICALISM AND THE  
CENTRAL AMERICA SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT, 1979-1992**

**By**

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## Abstract

*After the New Left: U.S. Cultural Radicalism and the Central America Solidarity Movement, 1979-1992* examines how the work of intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers combined with that of transnational solidarity activists during the 1980s to negotiate the legacies of the U.S. New Left and create a radical anti-interventionist movement forged around opposition to the policies of the Reagan administration in Central America. The case studies examined include the revisionist historiography of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko, transnational debates about the meaning of “solidarity” in the pages of several important publications by Verso Books, anti-interventionist journalism at left-liberal magazine *The Nation* and radical weekly newspaper the *Guardian*, and political filmmaking including Haskell Wexler’s *Latino* (1985) and Oliver Stone’s *Salvador* (1986), as well as feminist documentaries *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983) and *Maria’s Story* (1991).

Detailed historical analysis of each case study casts light on the relationship that developed between cultural work and political activism during the 1980s, a relationship that helped to sustain the U.S. left through a long and difficult period of Republican ascendancy, economic restructuring and decline in trade union militancy. Ultimately, whilst the individuals and institutions examined often used their work to provide *representations* of the ideas and impulses of the Central America solidarity movement, they also played a sometimes unanticipated role in the *constitution* of anti-interventionist politics. In other words, the cultural work of intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers played a role not only in reflecting political processes, but also in

helping to shape them. Analysis of the uses to which U.S. cultural radicalism was put in the immediate period “after the New Left” therefore provides an excellent opportunity not only to engage with the complex legacies of 1960s radicalism in recent American history, but also to rethink the question of the relationship between radical culture and activist politics.



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No matter how strong a social or ideological system, it cannot control everything within its domain. Many people feel powerless before a media-government combination that rumbles on inattentively. And yet, the presence of a fledgling alternative to this combination has appeared in America, and in many ways has made its contribution to the emergence of a counter-politics, which, while it is limited to the ideological and cultural realm, is nevertheless of inestimable significance.

Edward Said, "Irangate: A Many-Sided Crisis" (1987)

## Introduction

### Rethinking Radical Politics in the 1980s: Cultures of Central America Solidarity

In October 1986, American Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson traveled to Nicaragua to interview Tomás Borge, who was at that time Interior Minister in the Sandinista government that had ruled the country since the culmination of a long and protracted revolution in 1979. In making his political pilgrimage to Central America, Jameson was by no means unique: during a similar period, many thousands of U.S. journalists, intellectuals and activists traveled to the region to experience life in revolutionary Nicaragua, or to learn first hand about the guerrilla movements that had taken up arms against the U.S.-backed oligarchies that ruled El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.<sup>1</sup> Taken together, these travelers formed one important sector in the Central America solidarity movement that emerged during the late 1970s and retained a presence within the U.S. left until the early 1990s, comprising a loose coalition of leftist, peace, and religious groups united around a commonly held opposition to U.S. foreign policy in the region. Upon his return, Jameson's interview with Borge was published in the British Marxist journal *New Left Review* (NLR). Introducing the piece, he made clear that his central interest in travelling to Nicaragua was to learn

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<sup>1</sup> In one estimate, the number of activists who travelled to Nicaragua during the 1980s was 100,000 alone. See Roger Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds: The Debate over U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua in the 1980s" in *Peace and Change* 35:1 (January 2010) p. 11.

about “the originality of the Sandinista revolutionary process”, and to think through the various ways in which the U.S. left should respond.<sup>2</sup>

At a similar time, actor Ed Asner, a U.S. cultural leftist of a very different stripe to Jameson, also became involved with anti-interventionist activism. During the 1970s, Asner became a household name due to his portrayal of newspaper editor Lou Grant, first in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) and then in its spin off series, *Lou Grant* (1977-1982). Involved in union politics throughout his career, Asner became president of the Screen Actors Guild in 1981, and soon began to use his position to speak out on political issues, most notably the Reagan administration’s funding of repressive forces in El Salvador. After Asner held a Washington, D.C. press conference in 1982 at which he denounced U.S. foreign policy in Central America and backed efforts to send medical aid to victims of the Salvadoran “death squads”, CBS cancelled *Lou Grant* in response to complaints from right-wing politicians and pressure groups arguing that Asner was a supporter of communist forces in the region.<sup>3</sup> Undeterred, the actor continued to publically articulate his solidarity with the Salvadoran revolution, leading the Screen Actors Guild in a joint effort with other unions to defy AFL-CIO president Lane Kirkland’s pro-Reagan line on Central America. Speaking at the organisation’s 1985 convention, for example, Asner highlighted the concerns of many labour activists when he asked:

How far to the right are we willing to travel in the name of democratic trade unions?  
The human destruction in El Salvador has been one hundred times greater than in

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<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Tomás Borge on the Nicaraguan Revolution” in *New Left Review* 1/164 (July-August 1987) p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Dowie and David Talbot, “Asner: Too Hot for Medium Cool” in *Mother Jones* (August 1982) pp. 6, 10-13.

Nicaragua. And yet our institutional rhetoric offers no reflection of this great contrast, even when the victims include our own fellow trade unionists.<sup>4</sup>

Jameson's journey to Nicaragua and Asner's public defiance of Reagan administration policy in El Salvador are instructive because, in different ways, they highlight the significance of Central American revolutionary struggle for the U.S. intellectual and cultural left during the period between the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979 and the end of the Salvadoran civil war in 1992. *After the New Left: U.S. Cultural Radicalism and the Central America Solidarity Movement, 1979-1992* focuses on several diverse groupings of U.S. leftists who, like Jameson and Asner, did not engage with Central American politics as full-time activists on the payroll of solidarity organizations, but instead sought to use their positions within the intellectual and cultural life of the U.S. left to shape its response to revolutionary upheaval in the region. In focusing on these academics, journalists and filmmakers, the chapters below seek to show that, through the work of individuals such as Walter LaFeber, Mike Davis, Pamela Yates and Haskell Wexler, and institutions such as Verso Books, *The Nation* and the *Guardian*, U.S. anti-interventionism flourished during the late Cold War in a complex web of interconnected ideas and texts that sought to negotiate the various legacies of the 1960s New Left.

This was a highly politicised cultural formation. As a consequence, the historical analysis that follows casts light on the relationship that developed between cultural radicalism and political activism during the 1980s, one that helped to sustain the U.S. left through a long and difficult period of Republican ascendancy, economic restructuring and decline in trade union militancy. Ultimately, whilst the individuals

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in John Bennett Sears, "Peace Work: The Antiwar Tradition in American Labor from the Cold War to the Iraq War" in *Diplomatic History* 34:4 (September 2010) p. 713.

and institutions examined often used their work to provide *representations* of the ideas and impulses of the Central America solidarity movement, they also played a sometimes unanticipated role in the *constitution* of anti-interventionist politics. In other words, the cultural work of intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers played a role not only in reflecting political processes, but also in helping to shape them. Analysis of the uses to which U.S. cultural radicalism was put in the immediate period “after the New Left” therefore provides an excellent opportunity not only to engage with the complex legacies of 1960s radicalism in recent American history, but also to rethink the question of the relationship between radical culture and activist politics.

## I.

The existence of the type of cultural radicalism exemplified by Jameson and Asner has not yet been fully recognised by historians of 1980s America. Indeed, until recently the historiography of the era has been skewed towards narratives that all but ignore the existence of left-wing politics outside of the confines of the Democratic Party. For example, it has long been *de rigeur* to focus on the period through the biographical lens of Ronald Reagan, whose name has become a synecdoche not only for his presidential term (1981-1989) but for the decade as a whole, with historians often referring to the “Reagan era” or the “age of Reagan”.<sup>5</sup> In these narratives, Reagan’s electoral victories against Jimmy Carter in 1980 and Walter Mondale in 1984 are argued to have been the high tide of a brand of political conservatism that

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers has recently noted the inadequacy of such a focus on the figure of Reagan: “Divided, not unitary government was the rule in the last quarter of the century... The age was not Reagan’s in remotely the same way that the 1930s were Roosevelt’s. If we are to look for clearer historical fault lines, we must look elsewhere than to presidential elections.” See Daniel T. Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2011) p. 3.

had its roots in the Sun Belt politics of the 1970s, and, with Reagan in the White House, was able to sweep all before it in order to restructure American economic and political life.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, even those scholars who have avoided reducing history to its party political essence have been reluctant to challenge the overarching narrative of the 1980s as a decade characterised by conservative political ascendancy, deregulatory economic restructuring, and the dramatic decline in the power of organised labour, not only in the U.S., but across the industrialised world.<sup>7</sup>

In all of these accounts, then, the non-party left is virtually nowhere to be seen. In part, this is understandable. Compared to the 1930s and the 1960s, to give two obvious examples, radical political activism was relatively marginalised during the 1980s. But this fact did not prevent a number of vibrant social movements from emerging during the decade, centring on issues as diverse as nuclear disarmament, the HIV-AIDS epidemic, anti-apartheid activism, global feminism, and Central America solidarity. Several recently published histories of post-1960s American politics and society, as well as a number of more narrowly focussed studies of political activism in the period, have begun the process of tracing the development and impact of these oppositional movements.<sup>8</sup> This important research is part of what Julian E. Zelizer has

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: America and its President in the 1980s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Haynes Johnson, *Sleepwalking Through History: America in the Reagan Years* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003); John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Gil Troy, *Morning in America: How Ronald Reagan Invented the 1980s* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Robert M. Collins, *Transforming America: Politics and Culture During the Reagan Years* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, "The Reagan Revolution in International Perspective: Conservative Assaults on the Welfare State Across the Industrialised World" in Richard S. Canley (ed.), *Reassessing the Reagan Presidency* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003); Kimberley R. Moffitt and Duncan A. Campbell (eds.), *The 1980s: A Critical and Transitional Decade* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> For broader studies, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2002); Van Gosse and Richard Moser (eds.), *The World the Sixties Made:*



described as a “new wave” of historical scholarship on the history of American conservatism that is developing “a historical narrative about the divisions, oppositions, struggles and compromises” that conservatives battled with during their rise to power in the 1970s and 1980s, a rapidly developing subfield of recent American historiography that this thesis aims to supplement.<sup>9</sup>

In making these points, it is worth bearing in mind that until approximately fifteen years ago, the historiography of the 1960s was equally lopsided. Many accounts of the decade, often written by former participants in the New Left, emphasised narratives of liberalism and radicalism by focussing on the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, the emergence of second wave feminism, anti-Vietnam War activism, thereby glossing over the existence of conservative activist currents.<sup>10</sup> However, as a number of works have demonstrated in recent years, the American conservative movement of the 1960s was just as important as its liberal and radical

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*Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011). See also chapters on the 1970s and 1980s in Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792-Present* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010); Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011). For more specific studies of localised movements or those targeting specific issues, see Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War On Poverty* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2005); Melani McAlister, “Suffering Sisters? American Feminists and the Problem of Female Genital Surgeries” in Michael Kazin and Joseph A. Martin (eds.), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Robert Surbrugg, *Beyond Vietnam: The Politics of Protest in Massachusetts, 1974-1990* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Julian E. Zelizer, “Rethinking the History of American Conservatism” in *Reviews in American History* 38:2 (June 2010) p. 387.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973); James Miller, *“Democracy is in the Streets”: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); David Farber (ed.), *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Terry H. Anderson, *The Movement and the Sixties: Protest in America from Greensboro to Wounded Knee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *American Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

counterparts, given the origins of the soon-to-be ascendant New Right in the popularity of politicians such as Barry Goldwater, and grassroots organisations such as Young Americans for Freedom.<sup>11</sup>

With the sea change that has taken place in 1960s historiography in mind, it is time to rethink the history of American politics during the 1980s, in order to retrieve the existence of a culture of opposition to the nation's rightward drift during the decade. Of course, this is not to go so far as to say that this was, in fact, an inherently liberal period in American history that has been misdiagnosed. Rather, it is to make the point that the left was by no means invisible during the 1980s, even if, on balance, it ended the decade in defeat. There are two specific justifications for this line of research. First, it is often from eras of defeat for the left, when activists are forced to find new and imaginative ways to sustain their opposition to the status quo, that the most valuable lessons can be learned. Second, and building from this point, the 1980s acted as a bridge for the U.S. left between the radicalism of the "long sixties" and that of the present day. It is therefore impossible to ascertain the prospects for the American left today without understanding how an earlier generation of radicals negotiated the legacies of the New Left and sought to make them relevant to the changing political scene of the 1980s.

Extant accounts of this transition often give significant weight to an essentialised understanding of the 1960s that divides the history of the era into the

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<sup>11</sup> See Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (New York: Guilford Press, 1995); Mary C. Brennan, *Turning Right in the Sixties: The Conservative Capture of the GOP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); John A. Andrew, *The Other Side of the Sixties: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of Conservative Politics* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Kurt Schuparra, *Triumph of the Right: The Rise of the California Conservative Movement* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); Matthew Dallek, *The Right Moment: Ronald Reagan's First Victory and the Decisive Turning Point in American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 2000); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2001); Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

“good sixties”, which occurred before the rise of the Black Panthers, Weather Underground and other militant groups, and the “bad sixties”, which came after these events and saw the movement implode.<sup>12</sup> This type of analysis maintains that the early New Left was a movement betrayed: in the subtitle of ex-SDSer Todd Gitlin’s notable participant history of the period, “years of hope” gave way to “days of rage”.<sup>13</sup> As historian Van Gosse has shown, one significant implication of this “declensionist” approach to the history of the 1960s is the manner in which it assumes that the politics of the New Left withered away somewhere between the global upheavals of 1968 and U.S. defeat in Vietnam in 1973. The New Left’s implosion, so the story goes, meant that radicals were only able to express the politics they learned before 1968 by becoming a cultural left and thereby absenting themselves from actual political struggle.<sup>14</sup>

In focussing on the role of intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers in the representation and constitution of the Central America solidarity movement, this thesis highlights the myriad ways in which cultural radicals were able to address their work directly to the causes of anti-interventionist activism. To do so, it posits an alternate periodisation of the American 1980s that is based not on the vicissitudes of presidential politics, but rather the timeline of U.S. intervention in Central America. Its starting point is therefore the overthrow of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua in 1979, and its culmination the end of the Salvadoran civil war in 1992. Such a

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<sup>12</sup> John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992); Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996); Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

<sup>14</sup> Van Gosse, “Postmodern America: A New Democratic Order in the Second Gilded Age” in Van Gosse and Richard Mosse (eds.), *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) p. 7.

periodisation emphasises the manner in which the chapters that follow use the history of U.S. foreign policy to illuminate 1980s leftism. The thesis consequently aims to be a work of both cultural *and* social movement history: cultural history, in that it attempts to clarify the political interests of various intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers who aligned themselves with the cause of Central American solidarity; social movement history, in that it demonstrates the vital importance of a “cultural left” to any movement for political and social change.

## II.

In 1983, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), a left-wing organisation involved in Central America activism, produced an internal discussion paper that sought to outline three ideological currents within the solidarity movement: anti-interventionism, solidarity and anti-imperialism. “Anti-interventionism”, the paper argued, formed the movement’s broadest front, embracing all of those forces in society – including conservative isolationists and libertarians – “who oppose war and intervention for whatever reason.”<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, “solidarity” was a concept limited to “a special contingent of the broad anti-interventionist movement.” It identified with, and organised active support for, Central American national liberation movements, and sought to “educate the U.S. people as to the justness and inevitability of the revolutionary cause in Latin America.” Those activists concerned with solidarity were consequently theorised as the vanguard of a broader anti-interventionist movement.<sup>16</sup> To be defined as “anti-imperialist” was to

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<sup>15</sup> “Solidarity Movement and Anti-Intervention Movement Defined” (1983), CISPES internal discussion paper, Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 4, Folder 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

“be in favour of the abolition of the economic system that produces foreign domination and aggression.” CISPES, it was explained, was *not* an anti-imperialist organisation, even though many of its members could be described as anti-imperialists, simply because “the solidarity level embraces many forces who are not anti-imperialist.”<sup>17</sup> Each of these ideological currents played an important role in the thinking of the individuals and institutions analysed in this thesis. They were formulated in response to the specific historical, political, diplomatic and economic conditions of the late Cold War era, and of the 1980s more specifically. These conditions therefore require analysis in order to fully understand the social context out of which the Central America solidarity movement developed.<sup>18</sup>

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, academics and intellectuals began to argue that marked changes were occurring in the nature of the geostrategic rivalry between the U.S.A. and the USSR. An illustrative example of this trend can be found in the work of linguist and radical political activist Noam Chomsky. In 1980, shortly before the election of Ronald Reagan, Chomsky suggested that a “New Cold War” had emerged out of the refreshed commitment from both superpowers to “militarization as a mechanism for imposing order on domestic and international society”. In the U.S., Chomsky argued, this process had its roots in attempts by agents of the military-industrial complex to overcome the nation’s “Vietnam syndrome” and prepare the way for a new set of conflicts with the enemies of global capitalism.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Scott McLemee, an activist in the Texas solidarity movement during much of the 1980s, initially detailed the tripartite ideological division of anti-interventionism/solidarity/anti-imperialism during the course of an interview in Washington, D.C. on 14 May 2010 – his thoughts on the subject were subsequently backed up by archival research, which unearthed the CISPES document referred to above.

<sup>19</sup> Noam Chomsky, “Towards a New Cold War” (1980) in *Towards a New Cold War: Essays on the Current Crisis and How We Got There* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1982) pp. 188-189.

Work on the history of the Cold War published after 1989 has shown that this periodization of the conflict's later stages was basically correct. Following the inauguration of Ronald Reagan in 1981, the new Republican administration went about implementing a foreign policy that sought to break from conventional strategic thinking in order to confront what it saw as the monolithic threat of Soviet communism. This led in January 1983 to National Security Decision Directive 75, which indicated that U.S. policy would "seek to weaken and, where possible, undermine the existing links" between the Soviet Union and its Third World allies. Such policies would "include active efforts to encourage democratic movements and forces to bring about political change inside these countries."<sup>20</sup> This, as it soon came to be known, was the Reagan Doctrine.

In both rhetorical and substantive terms, the doctrine marked a turn away from the policy of détente that held sway in the years after Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972. This shift signified a "change of method rather than aims" in U.S. Cold War diplomacy, which, after all, had been centrally concerned with the active curtailment of anti-capitalist revolutions in the Third World since 1945.<sup>21</sup> However, in famously describing the USSR as "the focus of evil in the modern world", and opposing policies of "simple-minded appeasement" towards it, Reagan highlighted the fact that his administration saw détente as a failed policy.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, in the period after 1983 the U.S. either increased or initiated aid to rebels in Afghanistan,

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<sup>20</sup> "National Security Decision Directive 75", quoted in James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) p. xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 331. For a theoretical argument that the "principal social dynamic" driving the Cold War was "the expansion and transformation of capitalist social relations and their political contestation", see Richard Saull, *Rethinking Theory and History in the Cold War: The State, Military Power and Social Revolution* (London: Frank Cass, 2001) p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Reagan, "Speech Before the National Association of Evangelicals" (March 8, 1983) <<http://www.presidentreagan.info/speeches/empire.cfm>> (accessed July 27 2010).

Cambodia, Angola, Nicaragua and Mozambique, amongst other Third World states, in the belief that one “victory” could potentially lead to the complete collapse of Soviet global power.<sup>23</sup> U.S. policy towards Central America was therefore one element in a global interventionist strategy that aimed at securing geopolitical hegemony through the promotion of counterrevolutionary forces.

This characteristic of the 1980s conjuncture prompted the development of the broadly anti-interventionist mind-set described in the CISPES discussion paper. As social movement historian Christian Smith has argued, such a reaction formed part of a wider “participation revolution” that emerged during the period, based on the assumption that “common people can and should shape national foreign policy.”<sup>24</sup> This desire for a more democratic and accountable engagement with the world prompted hundreds of thousands of people to join the Central America solidarity movement during the 1980s, with many of these activists also becoming involved in the anti-nuclear, anti-apartheid and Palestinian solidarity movements. This popular anti-interventionism originated in the argument that militarism and intervention on behalf of counterrevolutionary forces in the Third World were flawed policies that could be effectively challenged through the application of pressure on Congress to constrain the actions of the Reagan administration. Anti-interventionism as a mode of thinking was, as Van Gosse has summarised, “relatively impervious to the thunder of demonological Marxism”, and for that reason became attractive to a wide cross-

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<sup>23</sup> See Scott, *Deciding to Intervene* p. 4, and Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S. Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. xvi.

section of the American public.<sup>25</sup> As such, the Central America solidarity movement helped to forge a broad-based, anti-interventionist force within the U.S. political system that coalesced around opposition to the rhetorical and substantive shifts in U.S. foreign policy initiated by the Reagan administration in the period 1981-83.

The emergence of the Central America solidarity movement must also be examined against the historical backdrop of Latin American political upheaval. Of course, U.S. intervention in Latin America originated many years before the onset of the post-1945 geopolitical conjuncture. However, it is necessary to register the dramatic impact of the Cold War on the development of almost all of the continent's domestic political systems. The Latin American Cold War was characterised by a dialectic of democratisation and reaction, the dynamics of which were inherently linked to the demands of U.S. foreign policy. The periods 1944-1946 and 1954-1961, for example, saw the rise of democratic movements across the continent that stressed the politics of "individual dignity and social solidarity". The vast majority of these movements were crushed, however, as geopolitical "necessity" committed the U.S. to support conservative forces in a variety of states.<sup>26</sup> A notable example of this repression came in 1973, when a CIA-sponsored coup in Chile by a military junta led by General Augusto Pinochet successfully overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende. The coup, along with the evident complicity of the U.S. government in its design and implementation, sparked a wave of popular anti-interventionism that formed a bridge between the anti-Vietnam War activism of the

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<sup>25</sup> Van Gosse, "The North American Front: Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era" in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (London: Verso, 1988) p. 12.

<sup>26</sup> Greg Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) pp. 4-17. For an earlier formulation of this theory, see Göran Therborn, "The Travails of Latin American Democracy" in *New Left Review* 1/97 (May-June 1976) pp. 71-109.



1960s and the emergence of the Central America solidarity movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>27</sup>

However, the campaigns against U.S. involvement in Chile, and, to a greater extent, Central America, were rendered unique by the role played in their formation by the concept of solidarity, which derived from a variety of responses to the nature of Latin American political upheaval during the Cold War. The movement gained coherence in the years immediately before and after the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution in large part because of the work of activists from throughout the Central American diaspora, who provided a direct link to the region's oppressed populations and revolutionary groups, and played important roles in the development of networks such as CISPES.<sup>28</sup> Religion also played a key role in this process. The adoption of Central America solidarity as a key issue by various congregations appealed to individuals not commonly associated with radical or reform politics, and went a long way to disarming anti-communist criticism of the movement. But as sociologist Sharon Erickson Nepstad has argued in her work on the topic, religion was not only a structural resource for the movement, but also a cultural one. The doctrines of Liberation Theology, for example, which emerged as a political force in the region during the 1970s, harnessed the symbols of the liturgy to a tangible political project, and encouraged U.S. Catholics to stand in solidarity with the poor and

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<sup>27</sup> Van Gosse, "Unpacking the Vietnam Syndrome: The Coup in Chile and the Rise of Popular Anti-Interventionism" in Van Gosse and Richard Moser (eds.), *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003) pp. 100-113.

<sup>28</sup> For discussions of the role of Central American immigrant communities in the movement, see Van Gosse, "'El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam': A New Immigrant Left and the Politics of Solidarity" in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); Antonio González, "Chicano Politics and U.S. Policy in Central America" in David Montejano (ed.), *Chicano Politics and Society in the Late Twentieth Century* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999); Héctor Perla Jr., "Si Nicaragua Venció, El Salvador Vencerá: Central American Agency in the Creation of the U.S.-Central American Peace and Solidarity Movement" in *Latin American Research Review* 43:2 (2008) pp. 136-158.

disenfranchised of Central America.<sup>29</sup> Groups such as Witness for Peace and Nicaragua Network (NicaNet) also sought to take advantage of the region's proximity to the U.S. to take American citizens to Central America in order to "witness" the effects of U.S. policy there. The primary goal of this form of "citizen diplomacy" was to confer upon domestic activists a legitimacy rooted in direct experience of the Central American situation, but it also served to root anti-interventionist work in interaction between U.S. activists and the people of Central America.<sup>30</sup>

As historian of Latin America Greg Grandin has argued, while on one level the Cold War existed as a struggle over the "mass utopias" that the competing superpowers and their proxies attempted to impose on societies throughout the region, "what gave the struggle its transcendental force was the politicisation and internationalisation of everyday life and familiar encounters."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this seems to have been a point that the Central America solidarity movement grasped many years before Grandin articulated it in 2004. By travelling to Central America, self-consciously engaging with the historical and political specificities of the region's experience of the Cold War, and standing in solidarity with its oppressed peoples, the movement highlighted the fact that domestic opposition to the interventionist policies of the U.S. government, while important, was not enough to provide the foundations on which to build a successful social movement. The adoption of solidarity as a key goal, then, implied going beyond opposition to war in the narrow terms of American

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<sup>29</sup> Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. vii-viii.

<sup>30</sup> On Witness for Peace, see Martin, *The Other Eighties*, Cynthia Weber, *Visions of Solidarity: U.S. Peace Activists in Nicaragua from War to Women's Activism and Globalization* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006) pp. 39-45, and Roger Peace, "The Anti-Contra-War Campaign: Organizational Dynamics of a Decentralized Movement" in *International Journal of Peace Studies* 13:1 (Spring-Summer 2008) p. 67.

<sup>31</sup> Grandin, *The Last Colonial Massacre* p. 17.

“national interest”, and suggested that in order to be effective, peace activism needed to be fundamentally transnational in scope and organization.

The late Cold War was also a turning point for the international economic system. The “long boom” that lasted between the late 1940s and early 1970s was based on a predominantly Keynesian economic model, stressing state management in the wake of the Great Depression. However, as levels of productivity and investment fell in the early 1970s, profitability declined dramatically and unemployment rose.<sup>32</sup> These developments led to a series of marked shifts in U.S. macroeconomic policy, signalling a turn away from the Keynesian model. In 1971, for example, the Nixon administration abandoned the gold standard, thereby shifting the world economy onto a “pure dollar standard” and facilitating international currency speculation.<sup>33</sup> Two years later, in response to the 1973 oil crisis, the U.S. insisted that the excess petrodollars earned by Middle East states should be recycled through international financial markets, rather than the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and consequently withdrew capital controls on the flow of currency through its economy.<sup>34</sup> These arrangements positioned international private finance at the centre of the workings of the new monetary system, and, in so doing, provided the basis for a fundamental alteration in the shape of the advanced capitalist economies.<sup>35</sup>

With the electoral ascension of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. (1979) and Ronald Reagan in the U.S. (1980), another round of economic restructuring began. The American and British governments followed a programme of “supply side”

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble: The U.S. in the World Economy* (London: Verso, 2002) p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Gowan, *The Global Gamble: Washington's Faustian Bid for World Dominance* (London: Verso, 1999) pp. 19-20.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 21-22.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

economics, reducing corporation taxes to increase productivity; purging high-cost, low-profit manufacturing sectors kept afloat by Keynesianism; and increasing the role of the financial sector through deregulation.<sup>36</sup> These policies, which were underpinned by the free-market economic theory and libertarian philosophy of figures such as Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman – the figureheads of a conservative movement that had been waiting in the wings since the 1930s – formed an inherently redistributive project, which sought to combat the economic and social threats posed by the downturn through repression of labour militancy and the dismantling of the welfare state.<sup>37</sup> At the same time, in the international sphere, the U.S. implemented a policy of “structural readjustment”, using the IMF and World Bank to impose free market fundamentalism on ailing Third World economies.<sup>38</sup> This approach quickly superseded the theories of modernisation that had, at least in part, led the U.S. into the Vietnam War, and soon became the “dominant paradigm” informing the actions of governments around the world.<sup>39</sup> However these developments are characterised – “late capitalism”, “neoliberalism” and the “Dollar-Wall Street Regime” are just three of the numerous designations that have been applied – they leave little doubt that a series of major changes to the character of the international political economy took place during the 1970s and 1980s. The rise to hegemony of what Perry Anderson has described as the “organic formula” of neoliberalism – characterised by policies of deregulation, tax reduction, deunionisation, and privatisation – is therefore another

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<sup>36</sup> Brenner, *The Boom and the Bubble* p. 35.

<sup>37</sup> David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 19-21.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>39</sup> Vivian Schelling, “Reflections on the Experience of Modernity in Latin America” in Vivian Schelling (ed.), *Through the Kaleidoscope: The Experience of Modernity in Latin America* (London: Verso, 2000) p. 7.

important backdrop against which to consider the development of opposition to U.S. policy in Central America.<sup>40</sup>

The shifting nature of the international political economy during this period meant that certain sectors of the solidarity movement, especially those with explicitly leftist political affiliations, began to perceive U.S. intervention on behalf of counterrevolutionary forces in Central America as a socio-economic as well as a military-political endeavour. For example, CISPES publications consistently asserted that U.S. intervention in El Salvador accentuated the country's social inequalities through tacit support for repression of trades unions, as well as the promotion of a "phoney land reform policy" that led to the systematic murder of both its beneficiaries and organizers.<sup>41</sup> This type of formulation led certain sectors of the movement to go beyond resistance to specific instances of U.S. intervention in Central America, and to articulate a more radical opposition to the imperial system as a whole. Linked to this discursive current was the sympathy held by many in the movement towards the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. After the culmination of the revolution in 1979, the Sandinistas pursued a programme of land reform, democratic governance and religious tolerance, backed by macroeconomic policies that sought to maintain state control while allowing for a certain amount of private ownership. These policies garnered a substantial degree of international support on the left because of the manner in which they could be distinguished from both U.S. and Soviet economic and political systems.<sup>42</sup> In the imagination of the Central America solidarity movement,

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<sup>40</sup> Perry Anderson, "Testing Formula Two" in *New Left Review* 11/8 (March April 2001) p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> "El Salvador: Why Are We Fighting a War Against the Hungry?" CISPES/Institute for Food and Development Project Flyer, CISPES Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M93-193: Box 1.

<sup>42</sup> One example of this trend comes in a Nicaragua Network series of "Nicaragua Fact Sheets", published in 1980, each of which sought to sympathetically portray Sandinista policies such as national reconstruction, agrarian reform, as well as issues such as the role played in the revolution by women,

then, Nicaragua stood as a model of successful opposition to the doctrines of the new economic order, without risking the development of an oppressive political system akin those of the Eastern bloc.<sup>43</sup> These were arguments that formed the basis of an anti-imperialist critique of U.S. foreign policy, a response derived from specific shifts in the international political economy that began in 1971-73 and continued throughout the 1980s. Whilst the movement did not commit to this form of anti-imperialism across the board, it nonetheless became an influential discourse that articulated a fundamentally systemic opposition to U.S. foreign policy and its impact on Central America.

The shifts in the geopolitical relationship between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., the political upheaval that took place in Latin America during the Cold War, and the fundamental restructuring of the international political economy were therefore the structural limits out of which the three core political values discussed above – anti-imperialism, anti-interventionism and solidarity – ultimately developed. While these values often sat in tension with each other, they should be considered together, as a complex body of ideas that formed the intellectual universe of the movement in opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, and which, in turn, gave rise to the various cultural works that are the subjects of the chapters that follow.

### III.

How is it possible to theorise the interactions between the Central America solidarity movement and the intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers discussed throughout this

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the church, and the literacy crusade. Nicaragua Network Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M96-045: Box 7, Folder 6.

<sup>43</sup> Roger Peace, "Winning Hearts and Minds: The Debate Over U.S. Intervention in Nicaragua in the 1980s" in *Peace and Change* 35:1 (January 2010) pp. 21-24.

thesis? The question of the relationship between cultural production and radical politics is one that has generally been downplayed by much scholarship on social movements.<sup>44</sup> However, the organisational politics of day-to-day movement struggle can never operate in a vacuum, and it is only possible to fully comprehend a movement of political insurgency if we take into account the cultural forms that become allied with it. As T. V. Reed has shown in a recent work on the topic, to make such a point is not to argue for the “greater importance of culture” in the development of social movements, but rather to state “its importance alongside and entangled with the political, social, and economic forces that have traditionally gained more attention.”<sup>45</sup> To begin to understand these entanglements, it is helpful to turn to Raymond Williams’s concept of the “formation”.

Developed late in his career, the idea is most consciously articulated in two essays by Williams that were originally published during the early 1980s. In the process of casting a critical eye over the Bloomsbury Group in 1980, for example, Williams made clear that his primary aim was to identify a specific method of analysing those “cultural groups” that “have in common a body of practice or distinguishable ethos, but not the stated aims of a manifesto.”<sup>46</sup> Such a method would seek to identify a particular “structure of feeling” implicitly assumed by the entire group; in the case of the Bloomsbury fraction, this could be represented by the phrase “social conscience”.<sup>47</sup> Such an assemblage could subsequently be placed on a matrix

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<sup>44</sup> This point is made repeatedly in the essays contained in Hank Johnson and Bert Klandermans (eds.), *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

<sup>45</sup> T. V. Reed, *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) p. xviii.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond Williams, “The Bloomsbury Fraction” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1980) p. 148.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 155. Williams also articulates his notion of the “structure of feeling” in two earlier texts: *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961) pp. 47-50, and *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) pp. 128-134, writing of “a very deep and very wide possession” that is

that would determine both its internal organisation and its external relations, Williams argued in a 1981 essay. Internally, formations could be ordered around a) “formal membership”, b) “collective public manifestation”, or c) “conscious association or group identification”. Externally, on the other hand, they could be classified as a) “specialising”, b) “alternative”, or c) “oppositional” in their relations with the cultural and political world.<sup>48</sup> In the context of this thesis, it is the third of each of these designations that is most relevant. The cultural radicals who allied their work with the solidarity movement, while occasionally directly associated with groups such as CISPES and the NicaNet, maintained a “group identification” that was, on the whole, informally manifested in a general opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America, and was “oppositional” in as much as it sought to use cultural production to help raise “active opposition to established institutions” in the form of Reaganite foreign policy and its culture of interventionism throughout the Third World.<sup>49</sup>

Another methodological benefit of Williams’s concept is the manner in which it negotiates the interpretive divide between social context and the specificities of individual cultural forms. To cite at length a more explicit definition than any Williams himself provided:

A formation can be defined as an association of individuals which is more or less formal, who are engaged in cultural practice that can be narrow or broad in scope. A formation occupies the middle ground in cultural analysis between the general social history and the specific cultural forms. The point of the term “formation” rather than “group” is that it expresses its relation to the general social history, and its extension

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“the living result of all the elements in the general organisation” of a society or movement. In relation to literature, Williams calls the structure of feeling “the sense of life within which novels are written.”

<sup>48</sup> Raymond Williams, “Formations” in *The Sociology of Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) pp. 68-71.

<sup>49</sup> The phrases quoted come from *ibid.* pp. 69-70.



into the specific forms and practices of the group, aesthetic or otherwise. Both noun and verb, “formation” refers to the finished object, the organised structure of a formation, and to the processes that impel the formation into being and which govern its forms and creations.<sup>50</sup>

At the centre of any formation, then, is a “common core of conviction” that is “related to a shared social and historical position”, but that manifests itself in otherwise varying ways.<sup>51</sup> With this in mind, the analysis below recognises that the intellectual and cultural radicals under scrutiny did not share identical political viewpoints when it came to U.S. policy in Central America. Furthermore, the output of diverse groups of scholars, journalists and filmmakers are not treated as if they are in some way homogeneously “political”. Indeed, tracing the specific and peculiar political functions of, for example, documentary film, magazine journalism and academic historiography, is one of the key goals of the analysis that follows. However, Williams’s concept does help to identify the common social and historical context that drew these individuals and institutions together during the 1980s, and which caused a variety of the period’s intellectual and cultural forms to develop an identifiably anti-interventionist accent.

This is the type of methodology that has been pursued by several scholars of twentieth-century American cultural history, most notably Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front* (1997). The book, which exemplifies the fusion of social and cultural analysis argued for by Williams, details how artists, intellectuals, musicians and filmmakers united with the political activists of the 1930s and 1940s Popular Front to establish “a radical social democratic movement forged around anti-fascism, anti-

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<sup>50</sup> David Peters Corbett and Andrew Thacker, “Raymond Williams and Cultural Formations: Movements and Magazines” in *Prose Studies* 16:2 (August 1993) p. 91.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 90.

lynching and the industrial unionism of the CIO.”<sup>52</sup> One of Denning’s most important contributions is to highlight the manner in which social movements are unthinkable without the alternative cultural forms that emerge alongside them:

Like topical works of any moment of insurgency, one must recreate the moment in order to give them life. Otherwise they appear as dead letters, the ephemera of cultural history. If such works rarely evoke responses in other times and places, if they do not in themselves constitute a political culture, nevertheless one cannot imagine radical culture, indeed any cultural flowering at all, without them; they are the crocuses of a radical culture.<sup>53</sup>

This is an insight that has been built upon in the work of several of Denning’s former graduate students. For example, Nikhil Pal Singh’s analysis of the intellectual underpinnings provided by the work of various theorists of African-American transnationalism for the “black freedom struggle” that stretched from the Depression era to the 1990s, and Cynthia Young’s study of the formation of a “U.S. Third World Left” out of the work of intellectuals and cultural workers during the 1960s and 1970s, have both highlighted the manner in which an interdisciplinary cultural history of social movements can be both productive and insightful.<sup>54</sup>

This is a tradition of scholarship that *After the New Left* seeks to position itself alongside. However, it also aims to engage with another branch of cultural history: that which has developed in the wake of Jürgen Habermas’s classic work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), a theoretical and historical study of the development of the concepts of “public opinion” and “public sphere”

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso 1997) p. xviii.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

<sup>54</sup> Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

during the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century.<sup>55</sup> Since its translation into English in 1989, scholars from a variety of disciplines have engaged with Habermas's ideas, but the most relevant interventions are those of Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner on behalf of the concept of "counterpublics". Writing in *Social Text* in 1990, Fraser, a feminist critical theorist, suggested that whilst *The Structural Transformation* was an important and insightful book, its articulation of the "public sphere" was inherently sexist, elitist, and neglectful of *alternatives* to the liberal, bourgeois public Habermas took as his subject.<sup>56</sup> She argued that while there is always a "dominant" public sphere that reflects the concerns and interests of those who rule, "subaltern counterpublics" can coexist with it, thereby acting as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs."<sup>57</sup> Fraser cited as her main example the radical feminist counterpublic that developed during the 1960s and 1970s around certain key journals, bookstores, publishing companies and film distribution networks, but the designation applies just as effectively to the diverse oppositional culture that emerged alongside the 1980s Central America solidarity movement. This anti-interventionist counterpublic served a dual purpose in as much as it provided, to make use of Fraser's terms, both a "space of withdrawal and regroupment" for a beleaguered but nonetheless committed bloc of leftists, and a "base and training ground for agitational activities directed towards wider publics."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>56</sup> Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" in *Social Text* 25/26 (1990) pp. 59-61.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. pp. 66-67.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 68.

More recently, historian Michael Warner has built on Fraser's analysis to argue that:

Like all publics, a counterpublic comes into being through an address to indefinite strangers...But counterpublic discourse also addresses those strangers as being not just anybody. They are socially marked by their participation in this type of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene.<sup>59</sup>

One of the key themes traced throughout this thesis is therefore the manner in which the various cultural radicals under examination sought to negotiate the contradiction between focussing on a relatively narrow, but nonetheless important, activist audience in terms that sought to critique the dominant culture of late Cold War foreign policy, and addressing a broader public in a manner that sought to win its constituents over to the anti-interventionist camp. It was through this process that the various languages of anti-interventionism, solidarity and anti-imperialism were mobilised during the 1980s in a range of politicised scholarship, journalism and filmmaking.

#### IV.

*After the New Left* is organised into three two-chapter sections, each of which examines elements of the cultural nexus that developed alongside the Central America solidarity movement. Section I, "Intellectual Culture", examines the interaction between anti-interventionist activism and the U.S. academy. Chapter 1, entitled "Walter LaFeber, Gabriel Kolko and the History of American Empire" explores the work and public influence of two important revisionist foreign policy historians, both of whom engaged with U.S. policy in Central America, and sought to project their

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, Zone Books, 2005) p. 120.

voices beyond the academy. In doing so, they challenged prevailing orthodoxies within foreign policy historiography and proved the continuing relevance of historical revisionism within the late Cold War conjuncture. Chapter 2, “Verso Books and Transnational American Leftism”, examines two series established by British publishing house Verso to deal with explicitly American topics: *The Haymarket Series* and *The Year Left*. It highlights the transatlantic intellectual context out of which each series developed, as well as their attempts to elaborate a concept of solidarity that would unite the struggles of the Anglo-American Trotskyist left and those of various Central American revolutionary groups.

Section II, “Press Culture”, considers anti-interventionism in American journalism, comparing the views of U.S. policy in Central America as represented in left-liberal magazine *The Nation* and Marxist-Leninist newspaper *The Guardian*. It is argued that, in very different ways, each publication engaged with the legacies of New Left anti-interventionism. Chapter 3, “Left-Liberal Anti-Interventionism at *The Nation*”, explores the magazine’s determined faith in the ability of the American government, especially Congress, to halt the Reagan Administration’s “secret war” in Nicaragua. Whilst this discourse did not go unchallenged in the magazine’s pages during the period – most obviously in regular columns by Alexander Cockburn and Christopher Hitchens – it is shown that an essentially liberal hegemony was upheld over *The Nation*’s proposals for reform to the U.S. foreign policy-making apparatus. In contrast, Chapter 4, “*The Guardian*, the Solidarity Movement and El Salvador”, highlights the conscious unity between the editors and journalists at the weekly newspaper and the solidarity movement, CISPES in particular. The chapter shows how, during the 1980s, the *Guardian* attempted to move beyond the factional struggles that had dogged both its editorial board and the wider left in the 1970s in

order to promote an ecumenical, broad-based oppositional movement rooted in the traditions of Marxism-Leninism. It is argued that in spite of its small readership, the paper essentially functioned as a bellwether of much activist opinion within the solidarity movement.

Section III, “Screen Culture”, examines political filmmaking. Chapter 5, “Anti-Interventionist Cinema at Hollywood’s Margins”, examines three fiction films – *Under Fire* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1983), *Latino* (Haskell Wexler, 1985) and *Salvador* (Oliver Stone, 1986) – each of which dramatised the politics of the anti-interventionist movement through critical examination of U.S. involvement in Central America and highlighted the supporting role that could be played by mainstream filmmaking, whilst at the same time indicating some of the political limitations placed on progressive directors who sought to challenge both the industrial and the diplomatic status quo. Chapter 6, “U.S. Feminist Documentary Filmmaking and Central American Revolutionary Struggle”, focuses on two films: *When the Mountains Tremble* (Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel, 1983) and *Maria’s Story* (Pamela Yates and Monona Wali, 1990). It is argued that the manner in which each was circulated within solidarity networks and screened in a variety of activist contexts demonstrates the significance of feminist documentary filmmaking for the movement, as well as underscoring the existence of complex interconnections between feminist and anti-interventionist politics during the 1980s.

Finally, a brief conclusion, entitled “Cultural Legacies of Central America Solidarity” examines the contrasting stories of Paul Berman and other former radicals who are now disillusioned with the left, and figures such as Oliver Stone, Peter Camejo and Michael Hardt, who have, alternatively, retained a faith in the power of political radicalism in the face of the twin challenges of globalisation and a resurgent

U.S. militarism. Each of these figures was deeply influenced by the Central America solidarity movement, and in charting their divergent trajectories, the conclusion establishes the contemporary legacies of 1980s anti-interventionist thought and culture.

The central claim of *After the New Left*, then, is that the complex cultural formation that developed alongside the Central America solidarity movement should be considered as a significant feature on the landscape of 1980s U.S. political and cultural history. In seeking to orient their cultural production to the concerns of those opposing U.S. policy in Central America, the individuals and institutions examined in the chapters that follow explicitly engaged with the legacy of the 1960s New Left, which did not disintegrate as U.S. politics entered the so-called “age of Reagan”, but was instead revised and adapted by a variety of activist communities. Mapping the development of this important strain in U.S. left-wing thought and culture thereby complicates the temporal boundary usually imagined by historians to exist between the doomed radicalism of the “long sixties” and the hegemonic conservatism of the “decade of the right turn”, and, at the same time, offers important insights into the significance of politicised cultural forms for contemporary movements for social change.

**Section I: Intellectual Culture**



## **Chapter 1**

### **Walter LaFeber, Gabriel Kolko and the History of American Empire**

The nearly century-old system was collapsing, pushed by contradictions in Washington's policy and victimised by historical North American views of property relationships and revolutions. As large parts of Central America flashed into class conflict, the United States easily blamed the crisis on Communists and other outside influences. That explanation ignored more than a century of history.

Walter LaFeber, 1984<sup>1</sup>

Employing a logic that is ahistorical and irrational, the United States still holds the Soviet Union responsible for dynamics of change and revolt in the Third World, refusing to see Communist and radical movements – the USSR included – as the effects rather than the causes of the sustained process of war and social transformation that has so profoundly defined the world's historical experience in this century.

Gabriel Kolko, 1988<sup>2</sup>

During the course of the 1980s, a wide variety of leftist and liberal intellectuals lent public support to the Central America solidarity movement, including, at one time or another, Noam Chomsky, Immanuel Wallerstein, Manning Marable, Grace Lee Boggs, Jack O'Dell, James Petras, Paul Sweezy and Richard Falk, all of whom became official endorsers of organisations such as CISPES and Nicaragua Network. At the level of day-to-day political activism, then, the involvement of intellectuals in the movement was significant. However, it was also possible for writers and

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<sup>1</sup> Walter LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), p. 270.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *Confronting the Third World: United States Foreign Policy 1945-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), p. 296.

researchers to contribute to the development of solidarity activism in another, no less important, way: by explicitly addressing their writing to the history and politics of U.S. intervention in Central America. This type of work, which attempted to fuse scholarly research with forthright political engagement, is the subject of Section I of this thesis, entitled “Intellectual Culture”. In seeking to develop a mode of scholarship that could contribute to the anti-interventionist cause during the 1980s, all of the individuals examined below, whether writers or editors, gave significant thought to their relationship with the “public”, and made difficult decisions about whether to address a general audience of politically engaged readers, or a more specific constituency of bona fide activists. Their work also reflected on both the possibilities and problems of attempting to develop a fruitful relationship between intellectual production and political activism. The case studies in Chapters 1 and 2, which respectively focus on the revisionist historiography of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko, and the transnational activism of several authors and editors at Verso Books, therefore demonstrate the ways in which the intellectual culture of the 1980s U.S. left helped to refract the debates of the Central America solidarity movement in a variety of important ways.

Noam Chomsky was perhaps the most prominent intellectual to contribute to the thought and culture of the solidarity movement during the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> However, Chomsky’s political activism has been the subject of several detailed studies,<sup>4</sup> and it

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<sup>3</sup> As well as numerous magazine and journal articles on the topic, Chomsky also authored or co-authored three significant books on the topic. See Noam Chomsky, *Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace* (Boston: South End Press, 1985); Noam Chomsky, *On Power and Ideology: The Managua Lectures* (Boston: South End Press, 1987); Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Milan Rai, *Chomsky’s Politics* (London: Verso, 1995); Robert F. Barsky, *Noam Chomsky: A Life of Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997); Robert F. Barsky, *The Chomsky Effect: A Radical Works Beyond the Ivory Tower* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007). See also

is important to recognise the no less important contributions of a number of other key scholars to debates about U.S. intervention in Central America. The current chapter therefore examines the work of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko, two influential foreign policy historians and significant figures within the tradition of historical revisionism. First, it demonstrates a turn in their work during the 1970s and 1980s towards a concern with U.S. intervention in Latin America, arguing that both historians wanted to use their historical scholarship to better inform the American public and impress upon those that were willing to listen the strengths of an anti-interventionist approach to U.S. foreign policy. Second, the chapter uses LaFeber and Kolko to begin to map the intellectual coordinates of 1980s opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America. Whilst their work shared a similar approach, there were also key historiographical points on which they disagreed, and these often related directly to questions regarding the functions of historical revisionism and its relationship to political activism.

## I.

Gabriel Kolko was born in 1932, Walter LaFeber in 1933. LaFeber was educated at Hanover College and Stanford University before earning his PhD in History from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1959. Kolko received his Harvard doctorate, also in History, three years later, in 1962. After receiving their graduate degrees, both became associated with a loose grouping of American historians often referred to as the “revisionist school”, which, in turn, developed links to the emerging U.S. New

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Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2011) pp. 264-267.

Left. The revisionists, strongly influenced by the work of Progressive historians such as Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard, sought to resist liberal, “consensus” trends in American historiography.<sup>5</sup> Writing in 1962 in the *American Historical Review*, for example, John Higham voiced a commonly held objection to the work of historians such as Daniel Boorstin, Louis Hartz and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. In searching for “uniformity”, “stability” and an all-encompassing “national character” in American history, he argued, they evidenced an inherently “conservative trend of historical interpretation”, one wedded to the goals of Cold War ideology.<sup>6</sup> The revisionists wanted to counter this trend by renouncing “an unobtainable objectivity” and using their scholarship to identify certain individuals and movements that had provided resistance to “powerful institutions and dominant social groupings.”<sup>7</sup> This was the type of scholarship that Warren Susman, a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who had a significant influence on the outlooks of many revisionists, called “frame of reference” history: that which “undertakes to rewrite history in view of a particular definition of the contemporary crisis.”<sup>8</sup> In this conceptualisation, then, the revisionists would seek to write about a fundamentally *usable* past that informed a struggle, in the present, against the unaccountable elites that dominated American domestic and foreign policy-making.

In order to do so, they developed the “corporate liberalism” thesis. The concept originated in the work of William Appleman Williams, another University of Wisconsin-Madison historian who was perhaps the foremost influence on the young

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<sup>5</sup> A. A. M. van der Linden, *A Revolt Against Liberalism: American Radical Historians, 1959-1976* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> John Higham, “Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic” in *American Historical Review* 67:3 (April 1962), p. 613.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 614.

<sup>8</sup> Warren Susman, “The Historian’s Task” in Paul Buhle (ed.), *History and the New Left: Madison, Wisconsin, 1950-1970* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1990), p. 279.

generation of revisionists, both as a teacher and public intellectual. In *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1957) and *Contours of American History* (1961), the two books of his to reach the widest audiences, Williams cogently fused political, economic and intellectual history to argue that U.S. foreign and domestic policy had followed an expansionist logic from the days of the nation's inception, and that the Cold War was yet another example of American politicians' attempts to face down anti-imperial forces.<sup>9</sup> Narrowing Williams's temporal focus, but losing none of his political emphasis, Kolko's early work, as well as that of Martin J. Sklar and James Weinstein, focussed primarily on the Progressive Era in order to further establish the notion that American liberalism was explicitly tied to expansionist corporate interests.<sup>10</sup> These historians pursued in-depth analyses of governmental policy-making in the early years of the twentieth century, concluding that politicians such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson consciously worked together with capitalists and financiers to establish the large corporation as the dominant mode of business enterprise in the U.S. In doing so, Kolko and his contemporaries challenged the extant historiographical understanding of the Progressive Era as the period in which America was "saved" from the corruption of the Gilded Era, instead suggesting that the policies of Roosevelt and Wilson essentially maintained the hegemony of a liberal politics that,

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<sup>9</sup> See Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* and William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961). For an excellent account of Williams's life and career, see Paul Buhle and Edward Rice-Maximin, *Williams Appleman Williams: The Tragedy of American Empire* (New York: Routledge, 1995), and for an ambitious attempt to place Williams within a Midwestern tradition of historical writing that stretches from Fredrick Jackson Turner through Charles Beard to Christopher Lasch, see David S. Brown, *Beyond the Frontier: The Midwestern Voice in American Historical Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), pp. 127-148.

<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967); Martin J. Sklar, "Woodrow Wilson and the Political Economy of Modern United States Liberalism" in James Weinstein and David W. Eakins (eds.), *For a New America: Essays in History and Politics from Studies on the Left, 1959-1967* (New York: Random House, 1970); James Weinstein, *The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State, 1900-1918* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968). On the development of the corporate liberalism thesis, see Jonathan M. Wiener, "Radical Historians and the Crisis in American History, 1959-1980" in *Journal of American History* 76:2 (September 1989), pp. 408-9.

in Sklar's phrase, converged "upon large-scale corporate capitalism at home and economic expansion abroad." An excessive amount of power was therefore seen to rest in the hands of a "new corporate oligarchy" which actively *expected* the U.S. state to defend business activity abroad, and subdue labour activism at home.<sup>11</sup>

This approach to American history was turned into explicit political critique when voiced by the New Left as it emerged in the early 1960s around radical groups such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Activists in the movement used ideas contained in the work of the revisionists to attack U.S. diplomacy and Cold War ideology from a number of perspectives. First, they sought to highlight the corruption of American anti-communism. Beginning in the late 1950s as a response to U.S. policy towards Cuba, and continuing throughout the anti-Vietnam War campaign, the New Left described the anti-communism that drove American foreign policy as both counter-productive and baseless.<sup>12</sup> Second, the movement's intellectuals sought to explain the problems they identified with American diplomacy in reference to the thesis of corporate liberalism, arguing that the corporate state and the liberals who ran it were the key cause of U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>13</sup> Third, the struggle against U.S. diplomacy prompted attempts to forge solidarity with certain Third World independence struggles. As a result, a "Third World left", dedicated to the politics of global decolonisation, developed as a part of the broad New Left formation, highlighting the global-systemic nature of the movement's critique of American

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<sup>11</sup> Sklar, "Woodrow Wilson and the Political Economy of Modern United States Liberalism", p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, "The Cuban Revolution: The New Crisis in Cold War Ideology" in *Studies on the Left* 1:3 (Spring 1960), p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Then SDS leader Carl Oglesby expressed this point in a speech made in 1965. See Carl Oglesby, "Liberalism and the Corporate State" in Paul Jacobs and Saul Landau (eds.), *The New Radicals: A Report with Documents* (London: Penguin, 1967), p. 258.

diplomacy.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the New Left adapted the work of the revisionists to argue that foreign policy-making in the U.S. was fundamentally undemocratic, suggesting that the only way to hold American diplomacy to account was to subject its processes to the scrutiny of participatory democracy.<sup>15</sup>

In these various ways, then, the scholarship of the revisionist historians linked with the politics of the New Left to produce a political sensibility starkly opposed to U.S. foreign policy. LaFeber and Kolko were contributors to this intellectual-political symbiosis,<sup>16</sup> but it would be too simplistic to characterise them as “New Left” historians: there were, in fact, a variety of significant divergences between their approaches and those of student activists and others involved with the New Left. As we shall see later in this chapter, LaFeber had an uneasy relationship with student radicalism at Cornell during the late 1960s, and during a similar period certain sections of the student movement at Wisconsin upbraided Williams.<sup>17</sup> Even Kolko, who became directly involved in anti-war activism at the University of Pennsylvania, stood at many removes from more populist figures within the New Left; his subscription to the notion that corporate elites dominated U.S. history, for example, left little room for the traditions of grass-roots and labour protest that were so central to the world-views of historian-activists such as Staughton Lynd and Howard Zinn.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> A view that was made manifest in a speech made by historian-activist Staughton Lynd during the Vietnam Day Protests in 1965, and printed in Vietnam Day Committee (eds.), *We Accuse: A Powerful Statement of the New Political Anger in America* (Berkeley: Diablo Press, 1965), p. 154.

<sup>16</sup> Both revised and published their PhD theses in the early 1960s to critical acclaim in the academy, with LaFeber winning the 1962 Albert J. Beveridge Award. See Gabriel Kolko, *Railroads and Regulation, 1877-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965) and Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

<sup>17</sup> Williams's tempestuous relationship with the Madison student body during the late 1960s is detailed in Buhle and Rice-Maximin, *Williams Appleman Williams*, pp. 145-178.

<sup>18</sup> On this point, compare Gabriel Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) with Staughton Lynd, *The Intellectual Origins of American Radicalism* (New

Instead of simply conflating the revisionists with the New Left, then, what this brief survey of the intersections between historical scholarship and political activism during the 1960s shows is that a not always straightforward relationship developed between the two, one in which political ideals and academic practices combined to produce rigorous scholarship written with contemporaneous political purpose.

Almost immediately after the end of the 1960s, however, the revisionist approach to U.S. foreign policy came under sustained attack from a putatively “postrevisionist” school of thought. One of the clearest expositions of postrevisionism came in 1983, with the publication of an essay in the journal *Diplomatic History* by John Lewis Gaddis, entitled “The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War”. As his title suggested, Gaddis contended that the field of Cold War history was moving beyond arguments between “orthodox” (or consensus) scholars and “revisionist” scholars, towards a synthesis of the two viewpoints. However, this modest academic proposition provided cover for what was essentially an attack on the work of historians such as Williams, LaFeber and Kolko. Their scholarship was too economistic, Gaddis suggested, rooted as it was in a “Leninist” model of historical development.<sup>19</sup> He also suggested that revisionism based its claims about the nature of U.S. imperialism on erroneous assumptions regarding the benevolence of Russian intentions during the early years of the Cold War, as well as the undemocratic nature of U.S. foreign policy-making, suppositions which, he argued, did not stand up to empirical scrutiny.<sup>20</sup> In 1997, Gaddis recycled these arguments by suggesting that,

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York: Vintage Books, 1968) and Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (London: Longman, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, “The Emerging Post-Revisionist Synthesis on the Origins of the Cold War” in *Diplomatic History* 7:3 (July 1983), p. 175.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 176-180.



during the intervening years, a “new” approach to Cold War history had developed amongst a group of scholars fundamentally detached from political bias: “the ‘old’ Cold War history is out of date; it was *an abnormal way of writing history itself*...Like the post-Cold War world in which it exists, the ‘new’ Cold War history is only getting us back to normal.”<sup>21</sup> While he did not make any express reference to revisionism, it was clear that this was the type of apparently “abnormal” and overly politicised historical thinking that Gaddis had in mind.

The blind spots and inadequacies of these characterisations of revisionism have been pointed out on several occasions.<sup>22</sup> However, the importance of Gaddis’s articulation of a postrevisionist (or, as Bruce Cumings has shown, “anti-revisionist”<sup>23</sup>) approach to U.S. foreign policy within the context of this chapter stems from the manner in which it highlights the active contestation of revisionist assumptions during the 1980s. In demonstrating the variances between LaFeber and Kolko’s engagement with the issues surrounding U.S. involvement in Central America, the following analysis demonstrates not only the manifest *diversity* of the revisionist tradition (contra Gaddis’s claims for its homogeneity), but also its on-going *utility* as a means of fusing political activism and historical scholarship (contra Gaddis’s claims for its intellectual obsolescence). In examining the work of these two historians, then, the chapter aims not only to highlight their significant contributions to public discourse,

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<sup>21</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 283.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Lloyd C. Gardner’s response to Gaddis’s essay in *Diplomatic History* 7:3 (July 1983), 191-193, as well as Bruce Cumings, “Revising Postrevisionism, or, The Poverty of Theory in Diplomatic History” in *Diplomatic History* 17:4 (Fall, 1993), pp. 539-570.

<sup>23</sup> Cumings, “Revising Postrevisionism”, p. 556.

but also to demonstrate the functions of historical revisionism for political activism during a period in which its very legitimacy was coming under sustained attack.<sup>24</sup>

## II.

In 1978, LaFeber published *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective*. Ostensibly, the “crisis” of the book’s subtitle referred to the difficulties encountered by the Carter administration in reaching an agreement with the Panamanian government over America’s continuing role in the Canal Zone after 1977. However, LaFeber also sought to use his scholarship to highlight and work towards remedying a more far-reaching “crisis in historical perspective” formed out of what he described as the “vast ignorance” of the American public and press in relation to the history of U.S. diplomacy in Central America.<sup>25</sup> *The Panama Canal* was followed in 1984 by a much broader, more ambitious work: *Inevitable Revolutions*. Covering the history of U.S. relations with the five other Central American states (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica), the book was again intended to combat the “combustible mixture” of an interventionist Presidential administration (that of Ronald Reagan), an under-developed Third World region, and “North American

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<sup>24</sup> There are, of course, a number of other notable revisionist historians of U.S. foreign policy: examples include Gar Alperowitz, Lloyd Gardner, Thomas McCormick and Marilyn Young. But in a 1972 survey asking members of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations which authors exerted the most impact on their teaching and scholarship, the only scholar to outrank LaFeber and Kolko was William Appleman Williams, the godfather of revisionism, and, by that point in his career, a significant public figure. Both historians also succeeded in ranking above figures such as George Kennan, Samuel F. Bemis and Hans Morgenthau. Whilst this single survey, conducted at least a decade before most of the work examined in this chapter was published, is hardly incontrovertible proof of the influence of LaFeber and Kolko, it goes some way to highlighting their significance within the field. See Sandra C. Thomson and Clayton A. Coppin, Jr., “Texts and Teaching: A Profile of Historians of American Foreign Relations in 1972” in *West Georgia College Studies in the Social Sciences* 13 (June 1974), pp. 71-72, cited in John Braeman, “The New Left and American Foreign Policy during the Age of Normalcy: A Re-Examination” in *The Business History Review* 57:1 (Spring, 1983), p. 74.

<sup>25</sup> Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. viii.

ignorance” regarding the history of that region.<sup>26</sup> Violent anti-American revolutions had broken out in Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua since LaFeber had published *The Panama Canal*, and the American public, he averred, knew very little about why Central America in the 1980s was the site of such economic and political turmoil. A history lesson explaining the central role of American interventionism in creating and then reinforcing the basic conditions that made such revolutions “inevitable” was essential, and LaFeber intended to use his scholarship to impart it.

The genesis of each of LaFeber’s books is also worth noting. In 1974, the National Endowment for the Humanities granted the Cornell University History Department a significant sum of money to design “experimental undergraduate seminars”, and the head of the department, Michael Kammen, gave LaFeber the idea of teaching a course about Panama. In researching the subject, he realised that there were no books that provided an historical perspective on the Canal, and so he decided to write one himself.<sup>27</sup> In the case of *Inevitable Revolutions*, the initial idea for the project came from C. Michael Curtis, an ex-student of LaFeber’s who was a sub-editor at *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1981, he suggested that LaFeber write an article for the magazine about Central America, and the historian initially agreed to take three months over the piece. However, LaFeber expanded the project and took three years to write *Inevitable Revolutions*, with the article appearing *after* the publication of the book.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, then, LaFeber was aiming to reach a general, rather than specifically scholarly, readership, in the hope that his work on U.S.-Central American relations would have an impact beyond the academy.

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<sup>26</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> LaFeber, *The Panama Canal* p. xi.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Walter LaFeber (10 November 2009), notes in author’s possession.

Gabriel Kolko's key works during the period ranged more widely in scope and geographical focus. However, the motivation behind his central concern with articulating the structural dynamics of the "modern historical experience" was remarkably similar to LaFeber's. Kolko first used the phrase in the 1984 epilogue to *Main Currents in Modern American History* (originally published in 1976),<sup>29</sup> and then again in the subtitle of *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (1985). Its use implied an irresistible trend towards the decline of U.S. hegemony and the rise of national liberation movements as the agents of "profound social change" in the world-system.<sup>30</sup> A proper understanding of the "modern historical experience" as *process*, Kolko argued, could be gained from pursuing a detailed "anatomy" of the causes and implications of U.S. involvement in Vietnam between 1945 and 1975. Indeed, he explicitly stated in conclusion to the text that he believed the Vietnam War to have been "a monumental event which transcends one nation or time and reflects, in the most acute form, the basic dynamics and trends in the historical experience since 1946."<sup>31</sup> Kolko's research agenda also spoke to a contemporary political concern, as he made clear when he argued that his was a "radical scholarship" that would combat "disenchantment and cynicism" by making every effort to "explain reality in its totality."<sup>32</sup> Historians could therefore involve themselves in the struggle to restrain U.S. intervention in areas such as Central America, he argued, and play a part in allowing "the people of the world to develop their own future."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History*, p. 424.

<sup>30</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), p. 558.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* p. 557.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. xiv.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 558.

This approach culminated in the publication of Kolko's most ambitious text of the period, and the one that will be examined in most detail here. Again, the author justified *Confronting the Third World* (1988) – an examination of U.S. policy towards the Third World between 1945 and 1980 – in markedly presentist terms, arguing, “Because there has been relatively little effort made...to blend discrete events and facts into coherent patterns, most outsiders lack an intelligible scale against which to understand the significance of what occurs daily throughout much of the Third World.”<sup>34</sup> While the book's focus was the entire Third World (defined by its author as the whole of Latin America, Asia, Africa and the Middle East<sup>35</sup>), his chronological approach to the subject matter meant that the final chapters dealt exclusively with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the “the Central American maelstrom” of the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>36</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal, these events structured the contemporary relevance of the text in the mind of its readers, to the extent that it represented an attempt to historicise these two key moments of anti-systemic revolt.<sup>37</sup> Much like LaFeber's, then, Kolko's work was in significant part concerned with confronting the “crisis in historical perspective” revealed by public ignorance of the history of U.S. foreign policy, and aimed to function as a corrective to the political naiveté such ignorance engendered.

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<sup>34</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. ix.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. x.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 277.

<sup>37</sup> The contemporaneous scholarly reviews of the text back this point up. In his review in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, for example, Ghulam M. Haniff positioned Kolko's text in relation to the recent rise of “American globalist activism”, especially in Central America. Furthermore, in *Middle East Report* Irene Gendzier suggested that the controversy surrounding the Iran-Contra affair must have been a significant motivation for Kolko to write the book. See Ghulam M. Haniff, “Untitled Review” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 506 (November 1989), pp. 168-169; Irene Gendzier, “Containment, Counterrevolution and Credibility” in *Middle East Report* 160 (September-October 1989), pp. 41-43.

How did the two historians go about confronting this “crisis”? Their most significant convergence was the way they criticised American policy-makers’ use of anti-communist rhetoric to justify an interventionist approach to world politics. This “anti-anticommunism” was not original: as noted above, the revisionist historians and the New Left had consistently taken such a line during the 1960s. However, in rigorously applying a critique of anti-communism to U.S. diplomacy in Central America, LaFeber and Kolko used their scholarship to undermine one of the key tenets of Reaganite foreign policy-making, thereby rendering their approach uniquely relevant to the period in which it was written. For example, both historians presented a dynamic of conflict between the U.S. and counter-hegemonic forces in Central America that problematised the simplistic binaries of Cold War ideology. During the opening chapters of *Confronting the Third World*, Kolko was keen to stress that the major challenge to U.S. power throughout Latin America before 1960 was not the “alleged menace of Russia and communism but rather the emergence of conservative forces of nationalism.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, in his analysis of the emergence of Panamanian nationalism, LaFeber highlighted the desire of certain Latin American states to emerge as a “third force” between the U.S. and Russia, a bloc unwilling to choose sides in the Cold War until it had achieved a certain degree of economic development and political stability.<sup>39</sup> For both historians, then, U.S. policy-makers were operating under a misapprehension: the struggle between Western capitalism and Soviet communism was *not* the overriding issue in Central American international relations.

The intervention of the U.S. in Guatemala in 1954 was a key episode that both LaFeber and Kolko used to demonstrate this thesis. In 1951, Colonel Jacobo Arbenz

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<sup>38</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, p. 105.

won the Guatemalan Presidency in the state's second democratic election. After taking power, Arbenz implemented significant land reform policies, and in 1953 an Agrarian Reform Law was used to seize 234,000 acres of land owned, but unused, by the American-controlled United Fruit Company. In describing these events, LaFeber noted that Arbenz's policies led to him fail U.S. diplomacy's "duck test": even though the President had nothing more than minor links to the Soviet Union, and no socialist, let alone Marxist, political pedigree, his anti-Yankee, anti-imperialist policies allowed American diplomats to conclude that he not only looked and walked like a communist, but that he quacked like one as well.<sup>40</sup> This conclusion led the Eisenhower administration to launch what Kolko described as a "vast public relations campaign to convince the U.S. public and the rest of the world that Guatemala had been taken over by Communists", an exercise that paved the way for a successful CIA-sponsored coup against the Arbenz government in June 1954.<sup>41</sup>

The new regime led by Castillo Armas proceeded to ban trades unions, suspend political opposition, and arrest, torture and kill thousands of Guatemalan civilians, at the same time as over-turning much of Arbenz's land reform policies. LaFeber and Kolko argued that in ousting Arbenz, Eisenhower had temporarily managed to save the system favoured by U.S. corporate interests, but at a tremendous cost.<sup>42</sup> For both, the sponsorship of regimes such as that led by Armas was the inevitable result of a misguided anti-communism that forced America to become obsessed with the regional status quo, and to thereby view any attempt at economic or social reform as Soviet-inspired intervention in its sphere of influence. Building on emerging scholarly work that elevated the profile of the coup during the 1980s, then,

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<sup>40</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, pp. 114-119.

<sup>41</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 126; Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. 289.

LaFeber and Kolko used the Guatemalan episode to argue that the credo of anti-communism was not only ahistorical window-dressing for interventionist policy-making in Central America, but that it also forced the U.S. to collude with repressive, anti-democratic regimes in order to protect the interests of American capitalism.<sup>43</sup>

This was a lesson imbued with intense contemporary relevance for both historians. In *Main Currents in Modern American History*, Kolko had called attention to the Reagan administration's reliance on a policy of "horizontal escalation", which suggested that if the USSR attacked a nation the U.S. deemed vital to its interests, American forces would be used to launch counter-offensives elsewhere in areas where Soviet interests were vulnerable. This policy, Kolko suggested, rested on a vision of "diabolical Russian power" that did not allow for the existence of "autonomous revolutionary forces" anywhere in the world.<sup>44</sup> It seems sensible to conclude that it was this type of policy that Kolko had in mind when, in the preface to *Confronting the Third World*, he argued that detailed historical information would allow the reader "to transcend those mystifying Cold War shibboleths that describe America's difficulties merely as part of a struggle with Communism."<sup>45</sup> LaFeber similarly linked his work to contemporaneous political developments, noting the connections between Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric and the "paranoid style" identified by Richard Hofstadter in a classic 1963 essay.<sup>46</sup> In doing so, LaFeber predated by three years the arguments of another left historian, Michael Rogin, who in 1987 built on Hofstadter's notion to

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<sup>43</sup> Examples of this emerging scholarship include Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982) and Richard H. Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

<sup>44</sup> Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History*, p. 415.

<sup>45</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. xi.

<sup>46</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 276. For Hofstadter's essay, see "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), pp. 3-39.



point out the continuities between Reagan's political rhetoric and a long-standing "countersubversive tradition" in American politics.<sup>47</sup>

Anti-anticommunism was therefore a trait that LaFeber and Kolko shared: a politicised discourse that they both felt could make their historical scholarship relevant to the period in which it was written. In their work, the writing of U.S. foreign policy history was not an abstract professional pursuit. Instead, it served as a method of engaging in a public-political discourse that they believed could function to educate the American body politic. This observation provides the opportunity to consider the two historians as, in social theorist Michael Walzer's phrase, "connected critics", deliberately attempting to tap into the value system of their society so as to project their voices beyond the academy and make political dissent attractive to those not usually drawn to left-wing rhetoric.<sup>48</sup>

### III.

In arguing so clearly and precisely against American use of anti-communist rhetoric to justify intervention in Central America, LaFeber and Kolko set their work in the revisionist mould of the 1960s, subtly developing its relevance for a later period. But closer inspection reveals that there also existed a number of *differences* between their writings, which reflect the variegated development of historical revisionism during the 1980s. This section traces LaFeber's development towards a liberal, democratic opposition to U.S. foreign policy in the period, and contrasts it with Kolko's pursuit of a more radical approach to America's role in world politics. In taking this route, it

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<sup>47</sup> See Michael Rogin, *Ronald Reagan The Movie, and Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. xii-xv.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (London: Peter Halban, 1989), p. 4.

highlights the markedly divergent legacies of the revisionist approach to U.S. foreign policy history, and, perhaps most importantly, begins to plot the intellectual-political coordinates of the generational anti-interventionist sensibility that marked the 1980s American left.

It is first necessary to examine the two historians' diverging experiences of 1960s student radicalism in order to provide a context within which to discuss their attitudes towards political change during the 1980s. After earning their doctorates, both Kolko and LaFeber took up positions teaching history at Ivy League institutions: the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University, respectively. Kolko soon found himself at the centre of controversial anti-Vietnam war activism at Penn, and was involved in the 1965-1967 campaign against operations Summit and Spicerack, two chemical and biological weapons research projects conducted at the university with the express intention of aiding counterinsurgency measures in Southeast Asia. Kolko was the leader of what came to be seen as the "radical" faculty caucus, which engaged closely with student groups such as SDS and the Trotskyist Young Socialist Alliance, and aimed to bring about the permanent divestiture of all chemical and biological weapons research on campus. He used his position to help distribute material arguing against such research within the mainstream media, and the campaign succeeded in ending Penn's involvement with Summit and Spicerack in the summer of 1967.<sup>49</sup> In an article in *The Nation* that autumn, Kolko displayed his belief in the role of activism within the university, suggesting that

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<sup>49</sup> For a detailed account of the Summit/Spicerack controversy, from which this chapter's description is drawn, see Jonathan Goldstein, "Vietnam Research on Campus: The Summit/Spicerack Controversy at the University of Pennsylvania, 1965-67" in *Peace and Change* xi:2 (1986), pp. 27-49.

in taking such stands, the American university community may rediscover its own essential purpose and prepare the way for its own renaissance. It may also serve as the last important institutional refuge for the preservation of civilized values and conduct in America today.<sup>50</sup>

This specific example of Kolko's involvement in anti-war protest demonstrates his belief in the importance of direct engagement between scholarly and activist communities.

LaFeber's experiences of student radicalism at Cornell led him towards an alternative conception of the relationship between academics and activists. By 1969, the Cornell campus was wracked by militant student protest centred on the issue of racial justice. The university's Afro-American Society, influenced by the Black Power movement, called for the establishment of a Black Studies program, as well as for the censure of certain academics it deemed racially biased, leading to a number of stand-offs with the administration, and the controversial brandishing of guns during campus demonstrations. The administration, seeking rapprochement with the radicals, did not clamp down on militant activity, a course of action that led a number of faculty members to argue that the principle of academic freedom was being forsaken. LaFeber, in spite of his popularity amongst the student body, stood as a forceful critic of both the activists and the administration, arguing that the university should privilege the promotion of free, rational discourse above all other concerns. Indeed, he was deeply affected by the controversy, recoiling from the "lack of composure and reason" displayed by student radicals, and stepped down as head of the History Department in protest of the administration's handling of the crisis.<sup>51</sup> Dramatically

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<sup>50</sup> Gabriel Kolko, "Universities and the Pentagon" in *The Nation* (9 October, 1967), p. 332.

<sup>51</sup> See Donald Alexander Downs, *Cornell '69: Liberalism and the Crisis of the American University* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 236.

different to Kolko's engagement with 1960s student radicalism, then, these experiences did not diminish LaFeber's belief that the role of the academic was to "think otherwise" and to challenge the norms of society, but did emphasise the necessity for academics to remain fundamentally independent from radical activism.<sup>52</sup>

These diverging experiences form an important contextual backdrop to LaFeber and Kolko's contributions to revisionist historiography. For example, both historians sought to analyse American involvement in Central America during the 1980s in markedly structural terms, but the ensuing imperial systems that they mapped were very different. In his work on the region, LaFeber was clearly informed by dependency theory,<sup>53</sup> but rather than seeking to ratify its social scientific models, he sought to use the Central American example to complicate dependency theory's reliance on economics as the most important explanatory factor in the development of U.S. foreign policy. The genesis of this effort came in *The Panama Canal*. In an extended footnote, LaFeber argued that in the case of Panama,

"informal colonialism" seems to be a more accurate description of U.S.-Panamanian relations...than "dependency"...because dependency revolves around economic factors, but Washington's power in Panama allowed the use of direct political and military intervention. That power, moreover, was legitimized by a treaty and did not depend on free trade imperialism, as does the dependency relationship.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> LaFeber's articulation of what it meant to "think otherwise", a tradition he traces back to Fred Harvey Harrington, his PhD advisor at Wisconsin, can be found in Walter LaFeber, "Fred Harvey Harrington" in *Diplomatic History* 9 (Fall 1985), p. 313.

<sup>53</sup> This point is made briefly but not dwelt upon in Lloyd C. Gardner and Thomas J. McCormick, "Walter LaFeber: The Making of a Wisconsin School Revisionist" in *Diplomatic History* 28:5 (November 2004), p. 623.

<sup>54</sup> LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, p. 67 (n).

Dependency theory was useful in understanding American relations with Panama, then, but its explanatory power was lacking when compared with the more historically complex notion of “informal colonialism”.

The dependency theory that LaFeber referred to in the text was that of Brazilian economist Theotonio Dos Santos. In the same footnote, he cited Dos Santos’s essay, “The Structure of Dependence” (1970),<sup>55</sup> in which the economist argued that a relationship of dependence was characterised by “a situation in which the economy of a certain country is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected.”<sup>56</sup> The relationships of dependence between First and Third World economies had moved through various stages, he suggested, but all restricted the dependent nation from “reaching a nationally and internationally advantageous situation”, and consequently led to widespread underdevelopment in the Third World.<sup>57</sup> This method attempted to nuance traditional Marxism, but still aimed to highlight the deep inequalities created by capitalism and imperialism.

LaFeber provided a fuller and more nuanced criticism of the implications of dependency theory in *Inevitable Revolutions*. Referring this time to the Central American “system” as a whole, he again suggested that the “economic aspects of dependency theory are not sufficient to explain how the United States gained...control over the region. Other forms of power, including political and

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 67 (n). The essay was originally published in English in *American Economic Review* 60 (May 1970), 235-246. The version referred to here is Theotonio Dos Santos, “The Structure of Dependence” in K. T. Fann and Donald C. Hodges (eds.), *Readings in U.S. Imperialism* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1971), pp. 225-236.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 226.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 235.

military, accompanied the economic.”<sup>58</sup> The system was therefore one of “neodependency”, which combined American “confidence in capitalism” with “a willingness to use military force, a fear of foreign influence, and a dread of revolutionary instability.”<sup>59</sup> The “informal colonialism” of *The Panama Canal* had been replaced by the “neodependency” of *Inevitable Revolutions*, but the implications were the same: economics could not explain everything.

Kolko took a very different approach, arguing in the preface to *Confronting the Third World* that the exportation of raw materials was *the* defining factor in the structural relationship between the U.S. and the Third World.<sup>60</sup> This was especially the case in Latin America, where American diplomacy’s focus on “hegemony rather than cooperation” meant “power and gain...in economic terms from the inception was the foundation of both (U.S.) policies and actions”.<sup>61</sup> This situation continued throughout the Cold War, because the “reciprocal material linkages” between the U.S. and its informal empire were “so comprehensive and important.”<sup>62</sup> Overall, Kolko argued, American diplomats and economists saw the region as “a giant arena for the application of economic theories”, a vision that set in motion numerous counterrevolutionary interventions.<sup>63</sup> In conclusion to the text, Kolko sought to answer the obvious criticism that could be aimed at these claims: that of excessive economic determinism. He argued that he wanted to avoid “simple monocausal explanations”, but that it was essential “not to confuse the military and political effects of a policy with its basic causes”. Indeed, the scholarly process of highlighting

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<sup>58</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>60</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. x.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 96.

such distinctions was “the crux to attaining an overall perception of the United States’ role in the major Third World regions”, Latin America in particular.<sup>64</sup> In stating this point so forthrightly, Kolko highlighted the fact that a key distinction between his work and that of LaFeber lay in the role of economic imperialism as an explanatory factor for American involvement in the Western hemisphere.

The implications of this distinction were not only historiographical, but also political; in distancing his work from the economistic focus of dependency theory, LaFeber was also distancing himself from some of its radical political implications. In the article cited in *The Panama Canal*, Dos Santos had argued that the only progressive political option that could move Latin American economies away from dependence on First World capitalism was a revolutionary one.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, the collection from which LaFeber cited Dos Santos’s essay positioned the piece alongside the writings of popular revolutionary figures such as Fidel Castro and Ernesto “Che” Guevara as well as established Marxist economists such as Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff.<sup>66</sup> This was a tradition of thinking that had a distinctly revolutionary tenor, one that LaFeber opposed. The political implications of “neodependency” therefore allowed him to remain staunchly opposed to U.S. policy without relinquishing ground to those he disparagingly described as “romantic revolutionaries.”<sup>67</sup>

In contrast, the political implications of Kolko’s approach positioned his work closer to the dependency tradition. *Confronting the Third World* is thinly referenced, which makes tracing the intellectual groundwork Kolko pursued during his research

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 291-292.

<sup>65</sup> Dos Santos, “The Structure of Dependence”, p. 236.

<sup>66</sup> Fann and Hodges (eds.), *Readings in U.S. Imperialism*.

<sup>67</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 192.

difficult. However, his conclusions regarding the primarily economic basis of American imperialism were strikingly similar to those of dependency theorists such as Dos Santos, as was his commitment to the idea that national liberation movements were the inevitable and beneficial results of the “modern historical experience”. It would therefore seem unrealistic not to recognise the implicit importance of economic concepts such as dependency in his intellectual development, especially given the status of his wife and sometimes co-author as a professional economic historian.<sup>68</sup> If LaFeber’s concept of “neodependency” allowed for equivalence between economic, political and military factors in an explanation of the workings of American foreign policy, with the implication that an anti-interventionist political stance could realistically consider options that stopped short of complete systemic overhaul in the regions affected, Kolko’s work permitted no such room for manoeuvre.

A similar political divergence played out in the historical role each historian assigned to individual U.S. policy-makers. In line with his arguments about the totalising economic structure of American imperialism, Kolko credited politicians little agency in crafting the outcomes of foreign policy. “I have yet to see convincing evidence that bureaucratic politics among various tendencies in government...really alters the substance of basic national policies,” he argued in *Confronting the Third World*, continuing, “styles may change, but the parameters of possible choices within which ambitious or vain men function do not – and this explains the uniformity of policy during the Cold War.”<sup>69</sup> He reinforced this point in his discussion of John F. Kennedy’s use of prominent academics such as McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Joyce Kolko, *America and the Crisis of World Capitalism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974); Joyce Kolko, *Restructuring the World Economy* (New York: Pantheon, 1988); Joyce Kolko and Gabriel Kolko, *The Limits of Power: The World and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

<sup>69</sup> Kolko, *Confronting the Third World*, p. xii.



as foreign policy advisors. Kennedy and his aides believed their “Alliance for Progress”, which aimed to establish economic cooperation between the U.S. and Latin America, was a significant departure from the policies of President Eisenhower. Kolko suggested otherwise, arguing that the prominence the Alliance gave to funding police training schools proved that its objectives were never less than “aggressively hegemonic”.<sup>70</sup> This approach, which was premised on the advice of Rostow, Bundy and others, meant that the “era of the generals”, as Kolko put it, was simply justified in theory after it had been put into practice by the previous administration.<sup>71</sup> He therefore mockingly described these foreign policy advisors as “action academics”, and in doing so displayed his scepticism towards their importance in the policy-making process.<sup>72</sup>

In *Main Currents in Modern American History*, Kolko brought these arguments up to date to signal the lack of real change in U.S. foreign policy-making he believed had been instituted in the transition between the Carter and Reagan administrations. Although the two Presidents had clear differences in “tone, image and proclaimed intentions,” he suggested, “they ultimately groped with the same dilemmas” in the arena of foreign policy. This situation came about because both administrations refused to pare down America’s global objectives, and were therefore forced into “increasingly futile and dangerous attempts to transcend the limits of (U.S.) power.”<sup>73</sup> These arguments indicate that Kolko’s vision of U.S. imperialism did not recognise the ability of American policy-makers to fundamentally change their nation’s interaction with the Third World. As a consequence, his work resisted

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 133.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>73</sup> Kolko, *Main Currents in Modern American History*, pp. 400-401.

categorisation as “diplomatic history”, precisely because diplomats and politicians were not credited with any real agency in the formation of foreign policy. In taking such a historiographical approach, Kolko suggested that the diplomatic system was fundamentally unaccountable to the body politic, and that nothing more than profound, systemic political upheaval would rupture the ongoing dynamic between the U.S. and its empire.

LaFeber demonstrated a more optimistic view of the issue, regularly structuring elements of his scholarship around individual political actors. This is most notable in *The Panama Canal*, the six chapters of which were named after three Americans and/or Panamanians who were central to their narratives (“Wilson, Arias and Roosevelt”, for example, and “Torrijos, Kissinger and Carter”), the implication being that influential individuals *did* have agency in the historical process. This was taken further in the conclusion to the text, which posed five questions about the contemporary situation in Panama that LaFeber felt the reader should know how to answer (question three, for example, was “does the Panama Canal remain a vital interest to the United States?”<sup>74</sup>). LaFeber obviously believed that his history of U.S.-Panamanian relations between 1903 and 1977 could serve an educational purpose. More importantly, however, the *form* that this conclusion took also suggested that he believed a well-informed citizenry would be able to hold the American foreign policy-making elite to account. This sanguinity was toned down in *Inevitable Revolutions*, with LaFeber stating that the cycle of violence and repression in the Central American political system seemed “never-ending”,<sup>75</sup> but the avowedly *educational* nature of the text still demonstrates a cautious optimism that when given

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<sup>74</sup> LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, p. 221.

<sup>75</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 316.

a mandate by an enlightened electorate, certain politicians could change the nature of U.S.-Central American relations.<sup>76</sup> LaFeber's more traditional scholarship, which certainly *could* have been categorised as "diplomatic history", therefore demonstrated a liberal, democratic approach to the role of individual policy-makers that contrasted with Kolko's deterministic pessimism, with markedly *political* implications.

However, the political differences between the two historians were clearest in their respective attitudes towards the revolutions that erupted in Central America during the late 1970s and early 1980s. As the title of his key text on the region suggested, LaFeber believed that such revolutions were "inevitable", but this belief in the certainty of political upheaval did not form an optimistic conviction that all such events were constructive examples of the forward march of History. Rather, the key aim of LaFeber's concept of inevitability was to position the contemporary conjuncture within a long history of American imperialism, stretching back as far as the 1803 Louisiana Purchase.<sup>77</sup> He argued that the U.S. had itself created the various Central American revolutions the twentieth century had witnessed because of its exploitation of the region's economies and its poorly conceived foreign policy. The central question for LaFeber, one that he repeated throughout the book, therefore became the one posed by Henry Cabot Lodge in a cabinet meeting in 1959: "the U.S. can win wars, but the question is can we win revolutions?"<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> In the final pages of *The Panama Canal*, for example, LaFeber sounded a somewhat pro-Carter timbre in arguing that the 1977 treaty signed by the President was "a long step forward in making relationships between the two nations more equitable." See LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, p. 227.

<sup>77</sup> LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, 19. The long history of American imperialism was a topic that had been of interest to LaFeber since the beginning of his scholarly career. *The New Empire*, for example, had aimed to prove that the development of a U.S. overseas empire in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War was not a "break" in American history but "a natural culmination" that had been actively sought by expansionist politicians and businessmen. See LaFeber, *The New Empire*, pp. vii-viii.

<sup>78</sup> Quoted in LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions*, pp. 14-15.

Revolutions would be “won” if the U.S. proved itself capable of “working with...revolutionaries to achieve a more orderly and equitable society”, instead of trying to “cap upheavals until the pressure builds again to blow the societies apart with even greater force.”<sup>79</sup> LaFeber’s text argued that American diplomats had failed miserably in this regard throughout the twentieth century. Jimmy Carter’s human rights-based response to the revolution in Nicaragua, for instance, “naively sought to change the status quo without upsetting it, without revolution”, and therefore failed to “win” the Sandinista revolution for the United States.<sup>80</sup> This argument ignored the fact that an insurgency such as that launched by the Sandinistas during the 1970s was so fundamentally anti-Yankee that its agents would have struggled to work closely with an American presidential administration, not matter how benevolent. But the very fact that LaFeber was making it at all suggested that he believed in the existence of revolutionary possibilities in Central America that were centrist and democratic enough to turn away from the objective of completely overturning American hegemony.

Kolko’s attitude towards revolution in the Third World stood in stark contrast to this position. He had argued in *Anatomy of a War* that the U.S. had not lost the Vietnam War, but that the Vietnamese Communists had won it, thereby revealing the frailty of Cold War ideology and the interventionist policies it was used to justify.<sup>81</sup> This was a position he furthered in *Confronting the Third World*, similarly suggesting that the Nicaraguan Revolution was a fundamental “victory” for the left that proved the structural weakness of American hegemony in the Western hemisphere, in spite of

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 212.

<sup>81</sup> Kolko, *Anatomy of a War*, p. 548.

certain examples of “ineptness or confusion” in the Sandinistas’ actions.<sup>82</sup> “Whether the process would be a short or a long one,” he averred,

Nicaragua confirmed that the Cuban revolution was not an isolated and accidental event but part of an on-going process – one growing out of irreversible and cumulative structural changes that would increasingly confront the United States with the spectre of revolution in the hemisphere.

The distinctions between this position and LaFeber’s were twofold. First, Kolko implied that revolutions such as the one in Nicaragua could never tend towards the moderate centrism that LaFeber believed the U.S. should work to foster in order to “win” revolutions.<sup>83</sup> Second, his formulation of the revolutionary situation suggested that historical agency rested not with American politicians and diplomats but with the revolutionaries themselves. Only *they* had the power to determine their own futures. If LaFeber’s liberal, democratic opposition to U.S. policy rendered him fundamentally *wary* of revolutions in Central America, then, Kolko’s radicalism was more *celebratory*, fêting the revolutionary upheaval the continent was experiencing as a necessary, if traumatic, stage in the transition to a system no longer dominated by the forces of American imperialism. Such a discrepancy was rooted not only in the two historians’ differing interpretations of Cold War history, but also their markedly divergent experiences of student radicalism during the 1960s, and the consequent impact of these experiences on their individual conceptions of the relationship between historical scholarship and political activism.

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<sup>82</sup> Kolko, *Inevitable Revolutions*, p. 289.

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, he argued, “the problem of the United States is one of the most crucial obstacles confronting proponents of change in the Third World.” Ibid. pp. 295-296.

#### IV.

In 1981, Walter LaFeber wrote an essay for the journal *Democracy* entitled “The Last War, the Next War, and the New Revisionists”. Sandwiched in time between the publication of *The Panama Canal* and *Inevitable Revolutions*, the piece discussed “a remarkable rewriting of the Vietnam War’s history” by a loose grouping of historians LaFeber described as “the new revisionists”. With no intellectual or political links to his own generation of revisionist historiography, this school of thought had set out to rewrite “the record of failed military interventionism in the 1950 to 1970 era in order to build support for interventionism in the 1980s.”<sup>84</sup> LaFeber described the new revisionists’ project as an attempt to “remove the restraints of history” from the foreign policy-making process that was “as simplistic as it is potentially catastrophic”<sup>85</sup>, because of the manner in which it focussed “almost entirely on the threat of the Soviet Union instead of the instability in Third World areas that the Soviets have at times turned to their own advantage.”<sup>86</sup> Once again, then, it is possible to see the historian taking up the theme of a “crisis in historical perspective” amongst the U.S. scholarly and policy-making elites. Indeed, the only substantial difference between this central concern and those of *The Panama Canal* and *Inevitable Revolutions* was the primary focus in the *Democracy* essay on the history of the Vietnam War, rather than the on-going conflicts in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The mobilisation by the Central America solidarity movement of comparisons between U.S. foreign policy in South East Asia during the 1960s and 1970s and the

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<sup>84</sup> Walter LaFeber, “The Last War, Next War, and the New Revisionists” in *Democracy* (January 1981) p. 93.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 103.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 99.

nation's involvement in Central America during the 1980s is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. Pithy one-liners such as "El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam" came to stand as the signifiers of a powerful political analogy that activists used to mobilise opposition.<sup>87</sup> The fact that a historian such as LaFeber sought to draw attention to the manner in which conservative academics and politicians were also making this comparison therefore highlights the possibility for intersections between the political projects of revisionist historiography and the solidarity movement, even though historians such as LaFeber and Kolko were not engaged explicitly with its activism.

Indeed, this potential for overlap was made explicit by CISPES in 1983, when the organisation set up a 10-week educational seminar for activists new to the solidarity movement. Each week of the seminar addressed a different topic, ranging from "Central America: Social and Economic Contexts for Revolution" to "Reaganomics and the International Crisis". Its projected learning outcomes were threefold: fostering awareness of the differences between solidarity and anti-interventionist movements, explaining why the U.S. intervened in Latin America, and tracing the history of anti-war and anti-intervention movements in the U.S. during the twentieth century. The starting point of Week 1 of the seminar, however, was the question of "how the national debate purporting to 're-evaluate' the Vietnam War is an essential part of preparing U.S. society for a new war in Central America", and the set reading included LaFeber's *Democracy* essay on the topic.<sup>88</sup> The authors of the seminar outline described LaFeber as "a liberal historian and a specialist in modern

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<sup>87</sup> See Van Gosse, "'El Salvador is Spanish for Vietnam': A New Immigrant Left and the Politics of Solidarity" in Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *The Immigrant Left in the United States* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996).

<sup>88</sup> "Goals of the CISPES Seminar" (1983), Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 4, Folder 7.

U.S. diplomatic history”, whose central concerns were “militarism, the immorality of suppressing national liberation movements, and the misuse or over-extension of U.S. power abroad.” Whilst LaFeber did not “write from the perspective of the solidarity movement”, his work was nonetheless representative of the type of discourse that would appeal to “a base of the broad non-intervention movement that CISPES must build.”<sup>89</sup>

CISPES made use of LaFeber’s work in a manner that the historian could not possibly have imagined at the time he wrote it, but which was fundamentally aligned with his goal of confronting a “crisis in historical perspective” regarding American foreign policy. In doing so, the organisation demonstrated the continuing utility of revisionist historiography for political activists after the 1960s. Indeed, in much the same way as the work of historians such as William Appleman Williams helped to forge the dissenting intellectual culture in which the New Left developed, LaFeber and Kolko’s engagement with the politics of U.S. intervention in Central America, past and present, went a small way to providing intellectual resources for the anti-interventionist movement that emerged during the 1980s.

To return to this chapter’s epigraphs is therefore to demonstrate both the similarities and differences between the two historians’ approaches to historical writing during the Reagan era. In them, LaFeber and Kolko each allude to the anti-communism used to buttress Cold War ideology, and describe it respectively as having “ignored more than a century of history”, and as “ahistorical and irrational”. In doing so, they demonstrate the continued power during the 1980s of the historical revisionism that was so important to the American New Left in formulating its

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.



opposition to U.S. foreign policy. At the same time, LaFeber and Kolko's shared belief that these ideas could be of use in the struggle against the latest manifestation of U.S. interventionism, as well as the consciously didactic form of the texts each author used to deploy them, indicate an attempt at a direct engagement with the American body politic that confronted a broad-ranging "crisis in historical perspective". Far from being an out-dated mode of historical writing, then, the two historians' revisionism proved its vitality through engagement with the 1980s public sphere, exemplifying "perspectival" history at its best by intervening in the controversy surrounding U.S. intervention in Central America.

But the epigraphs also highlight some of the theoretical and political disagreements that existed between the two historians. LaFeber conceptualised the "collapse" of the Central American system as an effect of sustained U.S. mismanagement of the region. In doing so, he implied that it would be possible to solve the problem through a democratic change within the domestic political system that would pressure American policy-makers to work with and tame the region's revolutions. Kolko, on the other hand, saw these revolutions as the effects of *autonomous* "dynamics of change" that were not directly connected to the actions of U.S. policy-makers. In his formulation, the "historical experience" of the twentieth century tended towards a decline in U.S. global hegemony, as well as the growth of anti-capitalist forces throughout the Third World. Kolko argued that this was a fact that should be recognised and celebrated by the left, rather than feared. Taken together, then, Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko's divergent approaches to historical scholarship underscore the intellectual heterogeneity of the revisionist tradition during the 1980s, and, at the same time, highlight its on-going significance for scholars and

activists seeking to question the core assumptions of U.S. foreign policy in Central America during the same period.

## Chapter 2

### Verso Books and Transnational Solidarity

Speaking at a meeting of activists in Toronto in March 1982, Carlos Fernando Chamorro, who was at that time editor of the official Sandinista newspaper *Barricada*, discussed the role played by international solidarity in Nicaragua's on-going revolution:

A few days ago a continental women's conference was held in Managua. At that conference, one of our leaders spoke about the concept of solidarity. He said that we put such a high value on this aspect of our revolutionary struggle that one could say that without solidarity it is difficult to talk about revolution...Solidarity has a fundamental role to play in isolating the enemy, neutralizing other enemies, encouraging other forces, and directly supporting the struggles of the people.<sup>1</sup>

He concluded by asking North American activists to become "a militia of solidarity with the people of Nicaragua, a militia for peace."<sup>2</sup> Chamorro's speech provides an example of the type of rallying call to which the Central America solidarity movement responded in its struggle against U.S. interventionism. But the mere existence of such a call to action did not precisely define "solidarity". Did the term connote gathering knowledge about the struggles of revolutionary groups such as the Salvadoran FMLN and the Sandinistas, and contributing financial and material aid to

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<sup>1</sup> Carlos Fernando Chamorro, "Without Solidarity it is Difficult to Talk About Revolution" (March 31, 1982) in Bruce Marcus (ed.), *Nicaragua: The Sandinista People's Revolution, Speeches by Sandinista Leaders* New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985) pp. 14-17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 16.

them? Or, did it imply a more expansive, transnational aspiration to learn from these struggles, and thereby conceptualise Central America's revolutions as fundamentally interlinked with the struggles of the North American left?

In order to trace the progress of such deliberations, this chapter examines the gestation and development of two publishing initiatives established in 1985 by Verso Books to deal with specifically American topics: *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series*. Verso, which was originally established as New Left Books (NLB) in London in 1970, came to the forefront of Anglophone radical publishing during the 1980s, with its catalogue bridging the divide between scholarly and activist readerships. By examining the company's first broad attempts to deal directly with U.S. politics, this chapter does not argue that Verso played a determining role in the formation of anti-interventionist politics when compared with other radical publishing enterprises. However, it does seek to highlight a context in which a specific group of radical intellectuals sought to directly relate their work to the activism of the Central America solidarity movement. While the authors who grouped themselves under the banners of *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* did not all identify with a single political project, Verso provided them with a heterodox platform that encouraged a specific type of intellectual and political engagement based on the politics of solidarity.

The engagement with the public sphere enacted by those involved in *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* was markedly different to that of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko. More radical than the two historians, and certainly more intimately involved with organisational politics, the group of authors examined below made explicit efforts to relate their scholarship to active political praxis. The intellectual groundwork undertaken by the two series was therefore intended to underpin established practical and material linkages between U.S. leftists and those fighting for

independence and equality in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Overall, what drew these intellectuals together was an understanding that a consciously internationalist approach to leftist politics should form an essential part of efforts to resist U.S. intervention in Central America.

## I.

To trace the history of Verso Books, it is necessary to look back to 1960, and the founding in London of *New Left Review* (NLR). An unofficial organ of the British New Left, and initially under the editorship of Stuart Hall, NLR was formed from the merger of two older journals: *The New Reasoner* (NR) and *Universities and Left Review* (ULR). NR was based in Yorkshire and edited by historians John Saville and E. P. Thompson, and emerged from a split in the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) over its response to the repression of the Hungarian revolution by the USSR in 1956. Whilst technically independent from the CPGB, the journal entertained the hope of reforming the party in the name of “communist humanism”.<sup>3</sup> ULR, on the other hand, was established by a younger generation of leftists with fewer formal ties to the British Communist movement. Edited by four recent graduates of Oxford University (Stuart Hall, Charles Taylor, Raphael Samuel and Gabriel Pearson), the publication represented what Hall has since described as an “independent socialist tradition,” more cosmopolitan in focus, and keen to pay attention to popular culture, as well as to movement building initiatives that were independent of the CPGB.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For an entertaining first-hand account of the conjuncture out of which NLR emerged, see Stuart Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left” in *New Left Review* 11/61 (January-February 2010) pp. 177-196. The founding of the journal is covered in more detail in Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect? A History of New Left Review* (Monmouth: Merlin Press, 2007) pp. 1-42 and Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1993) pp. 10-15.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, “Life and Times of the First New Left” pp. 178-180.

The merger between the two publications in 1960 resulted in *NLR*, which attempted to fuse the separate outlooks represented by *NR* and *ULR* through journalistic explorations of the cultural and social, as well as economic and political, dimensions of a “humanist socialism”.<sup>5</sup> Also vital to the journal’s mission was the provision of “education” to the British socialist movement through the publication of various books and pamphlets, and the organisation of summer schools, conferences and discussion groups. A project that drew inspiration from Victor Gollancz’s Left Book Club of the 1930s and 1940s,<sup>6</sup> this intellectual and cultural nexus was intended to form a “spearhead of the New Left”, that would radicalise previously apathetic or apolitical social groupings.<sup>7</sup> In such a vein, *Out of Apathy* (1960), a collection of essays edited by E.P. Thompson and published by Stevens & Company, became the first text to be loosely named a “New Left Book”.<sup>8</sup> This eventually led to the formal foundation of New Left Books (NLB) in 1970, and the independent publishing company began trading under the moniker of its paperback imprint, Verso Books, in the early 1980s.

The history of the company is therefore inherently bound up with the development of the British New Left, and even before *NLR* was created, its parent journals received crucial transatlantic support from U.S. leftist publications. For example, *NR* gained its only commercial revenue from the regular full-page advertisements taken out by Paul Sweezy and Leo Huberman’s *Monthly Review*, and

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<sup>5</sup> “Editorial” in *New Left Review* 1:1 (January-February 1960) p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Between 1936 and 1948, the Left Book Club published hundreds of broad ranging and cheap political paperbacks, by fiction and non-fiction authors such as George Orwell, André Malraux, Arthur Koestler, Clifford Odets, G. D. H. Cole, Harold Laski and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It combined this publication project with the nationwide organisation of study groups that sought to develop cultural and social links between those groups in British society interested in Left politics, but not actively engaged in government. See John Lewis, *The Left Book Club: An Historical Record* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> E. P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy* (London: Stevens & Company, 1960).

*ULR* editor Raphael Samuel regarded Irving Howe's *Dissent* as his journal's "sister publication".<sup>9</sup> Further to this, radical American sociologist C. Wright Mills first published his now famous "Letter to the New Left" in the pages of *NLR*.<sup>10</sup> In these ways, a "New Left Atlantic" developed during the late 1950s and early 1960s, demarcating a transnational political sensibility that saw the goals of the British and American New Lefts as intertwined, thereby forcing those involved to "transnationalise...(their) scope of critique and concern."<sup>11</sup> This was a process in which *NLR* played a central role. However, as this chapter will demonstrate, the transatlantic dimension in Anglophone leftist thought was not contained within the gestational period of the British and American New Lefts. Indeed, Verso's focused engagement with North American topics during the 1980s indicates the continued importance of transatlantic exchange to the intellectual culture of late Cold War anti-interventionism.

In the decade between the founding of *NLR* and the formal emergence of *NLB*, however, a significant shift in the journal's political orientation took place, one that would influence the eventual constitution of the imprint, and draw certain key intellectuals into its sphere of influence. In its first three years, *NLR* had struggled to survive due to its oversized, fractious editorial board and a constant lack of funds. In 1963, in a bid to save *NLR*, legal, financial and editorial control of the publication transferred to a new editorial team, headed by Perry Anderson. The journal was kept alive through an injection of personal funds from Anderson, his brother Benedict, and

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<sup>9</sup> Chen, *The British New Left* p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> C. Wright Mills, "Letter to the New Left" in *New Left Review* 1/5 (September-October 1960) pp. 18-23. For an illuminating discussion of the transatlantic contexts of Mills's work, see Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) pp. 179-215.

<sup>11</sup> Joel Pfister, *Critique for What? Cultural Studies, American Studies, Left Studies* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2006) pp. 63-69.

Ronald Fraser.<sup>12</sup> The takeover saw Robin Blackburn and Tom Nairn become the new editor's key advisors, and is now thought of by historians as one of the signal events dividing the "first" generation of the British New Left from the "second".<sup>13</sup>

For the next two decades, a significant number of those involved with the journal and its publishing imprint also played notable roles in the British Trotskyist movement. During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, for example, Robin Blackburn and Quintin Hoare (also on the editorial board of *NLR*) were members of the International Marxist Group (IMG), the British section of the Fourth International, as was Tariq Ali, who was not an official member of either editorial board until 1983, but was an influential interlocutor and contributor nonetheless.<sup>14</sup> Perry Anderson explicitly addressed this political orientation in print in 1976, when he ended his book *Considerations on Western Marxism* by arguing for a Trotskyist strategy of fostering solidarity between the struggles of leftists throughout the world as the only means by which radical change could be achieved. In his view, the movement needed to look beyond the spatial confines of Western Europe in order to avoid political pessimism: "Western Marxism", he argued, "is necessarily less than Marxism to the extent that it is Western."<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence of these internationalist political proclivities, Anderson, Blackburn and Ali had all been centrally concerned with the potential of revolutionary struggles in Latin America since at least 1967, when they travelled to Bolivia on behalf of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in order to meet with French leftist Régis Debray. Debray had been imprisoned by the Bolivian government after making

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?* pp. 8-9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect* op. cit. p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976) p. 94.



contact with Che Guevara – who was then participating in a guerrilla war in the country – and the British trio hoped that their presence would ensure that he received a fair trial.<sup>16</sup> Upon their return, Anderson and Blackburn published a short essay in *NLR*, entitled “The Marxism of Régis Debray”, a preface to two extended contributions to the journal by the Frenchman himself.<sup>17</sup> The piece praised Debray’s “Leninist focus on *making the revolution*, as a political, technical and military problem”, as well as his insistence that “electoral illusions are the death of any revolutionary movement.” These formulations, which Anderson and Blackburn argued were “universally valid”, led to the conclusion that it was essential for revolutionary movements to confront the bourgeois state rather than attempt to co-opt its political processes, an observation that they believed could be used and developed by the British left.<sup>18</sup>

Tariq Ali’s most significant engagement with Latin American politics in the period came several years later, when, in the aftermath of the 1973 coup against Salvador Allende’s socialist government in Chile, he contributed to an IMG pamphlet analysing the topic. He began by praising Allende’s Popular Unity (UP) movement for having been both Marxist and anti-Stalinist, before describing its route to electoral victory in 1970 and subsequent period in power. Ali’s principal intention was to use the historical record to demonstrate the inaccuracy of Allende’s suggestion that there

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<sup>16</sup> Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect* op. cit. p. 37.

<sup>17</sup> Régis Debray, “Latin America: The Long March” in *New Left Review* 1/33 (September-October 1965) pp. 17-58; Régis Debray, “Problems of Revolutionary Strategy in Latin America” in *New Left Review* 1/45 (September-October 1967) pp. 13-41.

<sup>18</sup> Perry Anderson and Robin Blackburn, “The Marxism of Régis Debray” in *New Left Review* 1/45 (September-October 1967) pp. 8-10. The piece was republished a year later in a *Monthly Review* collection on Debray, once again demonstrating the transatlantic flow of ideas between the British and American lefts during the 1960s. See Leo Huberman and Paul Sweezy (eds.), *Régis Debray and the Latin American Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1968) pp. 63-69.

was a “Chilean Road” to socialism that ran via elections.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the author played up Allende’s heroism, arguing that when it became clear that the army was unstoppable after launching its coup in September 1973, he “could have resigned and left the country in comparative safety, but he chose to go down with a gun in his hand.” From this assertion, Ali concluded with a hypothetical question: “could it be that in his last hours Salvador Allende decided to symbolically demonstrate the futility of the ‘peaceful road’ and point the way to the future?”<sup>20</sup>

In its inherent opposition to the bourgeois state, then, Ali’s analysis shared a common core with Anderson and Blackburn’s engagement with Debray’s political thought. But Ali also moved beyond this point to elaborate the importance of the formation of a Chile solidarity movement within the British left, and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Solidarity means...agitating on the relevance of Chile for the struggle of the working class in this country as well as in Western Europe as a whole. Chile may be a faraway Latin American country, but what has happened there has had a deep impact on the advanced sections of the working class throughout Europe. A solidarity movement should therefore see as one of its main tasks the linking up of Chile with the real problems that confront workers and other oppressed layers in Britain. This is something that was very difficult to do at the time of the Vietnam mobilisations. Today, it is not only possible, but also vital, as the class struggle enters a new phase.<sup>21</sup>

With this type of discourse, Ali presaged the arguments made by various sectors of the 1980s Central America solidarity movement on both sides of the Atlantic by suggesting that enacting the concept of solidarity involved something more expansive

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<sup>19</sup> Tariq Ali, “Lessons of the Coup” in Tariq Ali and Gerry Hedley, *Chile: Lessons of the Coup, Which Way to Workers Power?* (London: IMG Publications, 1974) pp. 4-12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

than simply supporting Latin American revolutionaries: Western radicals had a political responsibility to learn the lessons of the Chilean left's failures, and envisage their separate national struggles as essentially interconnected.

In line with the preoccupations of Anderson, Blackburn and Ali, *NLR* and *NLB/Verso* published a significant body of work on Latin American politics during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>22</sup> *Verso* also established a series entitled *Critical Studies in Latin American and Iberian Cultures* in 1986, edited by British academics James Dunkerley and John King, which published works on the cultural and literary history of the continent, thereby highlighting the manner in which the company's list operated as a platform for radical discussion of Latin America by authors from all over the world.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, Anderson himself published two book reviews of titles relating to the continent in U.S. left-wing publications during the same period, indicating a continued personal engagement with the region, and, most notably, with the role played by U.S. foreign policy in the continuing Central American crisis.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> From *NLR*: Ernesto Laclau, "Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America" I/67 (May-June 1971) pp. 19-38; Jose Carlos Mariátegui, "The Anti-Imperialist Perspective" I/70 (November-December 1971) pp. 67-72; Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "Dependency and Development in Latin America" I/74 (July-August) 1972 pp. 83-95; Göran Therborn, "The Travail of Latin American Democracy" I/97 (May-June 1976) pp. 71-109; Atilio A. Borón, "Latin America: Between Hobbes and Friedman" I/130 (November-December 1981) pp. 45-66; George Black, "Central America: Crisis in the Backyard" I/135 (September-October 1982) pp. 5-34; Fred Halliday, "Cold War in the Caribbean" I/141 (September-October 1983) pp. 5-22; Edward S. Herman and James Petras, "Resurgent Democracy: Rhetoric and Reality" I/154 (November-December 1985) pp. 83-98; Paul Cammack, "Resurgent Democracy: Threat and Promise" I/157 (May-June 1986) pp. 121-128; Carlos M. Vilas, "Revolutionary Unevenness in Central America" I/175 (May-June 1989) pp. 111-125. From *NLB/Verso*: Régis Debray, *Conversations with Allende: Socialism in Chile* (London: New Left Books, 1971); Henri Weber, *Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution* (London: Verso, 1981); Adolfo Gilly, *The Mexican Revolution* (London: Verso, 1983); James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Central America* (London: Verso, 1988); James Dunkerley, *The Pacification of Central America* (London: Verso, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> The series sought to "broaden the scope of criticism of Latin American and Iberian cultures" with "accessible studies" aimed at trade as well as academic audiences. Titles included: Gerald Martin, *Journeys Through the Labyrinth: Latin American Fiction in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1989); John King, *Magical Reels: A History of Cinema in Latin America* (London: Verso, 1990); Beatriz Sarlo, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (London: Verso, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Perry Anderson, "Contraband" in *The Nation* (June 20, 1987) pp. 855-857; Perry Anderson, "Laboring Under Various Pretenses in Latin America" in *In These Times* (6-12 April 1988) p. 19.

Overall, then, it is possible to see the gradual development of an institutional and intellectual culture within *NLR* and *NLB/Verso* that was strongly influenced by Trotskyist political ideals, acutely aware of developments within Latin American radicalism, and keen to see the Trotskyist left stand in solidarity with the continent's revolutionary movements.

## II.

This was an institutional culture that Mike Davis became intimately involved in upon moving to London in 1980 to take up work at *NLR*. Davis, a Californian by birth, had first become involved in left-wing politics working with Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in the South, before becoming a full-time SDS organizer between 1964 and 1967, working in Oakland, Los Angeles and Austin, Texas. He then spent a brief spell in the Southern California Communist Party, at that point led by Dorothy Healey, who attracted Davis's sympathies by breaking with party orthodoxy and supporting Dubcek rather than Brezhnev in the aftermath of the 1968 Prague Spring.<sup>25</sup> After completing an undergraduate degree at UCLA, during which time he came under the influence of economic historian Robert Brenner, Davis travelled to the UK in 1975 to study at the University of Edinburgh. Whilst in Scotland, his rapidly developing Trotskyist politics brought him into the sphere of the "docks faction" of the IMG in Edinburgh, which in turn led him to his first contact with some of those in the *NLR* editorial committee who were also involved with the group. Indeed, Perry Anderson was so impressed by Davis's knowledge of the history of the U.S. left that

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<sup>25</sup> Victor Cohen, "The Left Coast: An Interview with Mike Davis" in *The Minnesota Review* 73-74 (Fall 2009-Spring 2010) pp. 22-24. For more information on Healey, see Dorothy Ray Healey and Maurice Isserman, *California Red: A Life in the American Communist Party* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

NLB/Verso offered the American a \$2,000 advance to write the book that would become *Prisoners of the American Dream* (1986), and, in 1980, he moved to London to work for *NLR*.<sup>26</sup>

Davis – who lived permanently in London until 1986 – was employed by the journal to expand its coverage of U.S. politics, a task at which he proved adept: as historian Duncan Thompson has calculated, articles about North America accounted for twenty-five per cent of the journal's output by 1983, when in 1979 they had accounted for less than six per cent.<sup>27</sup> After achieving this breakthrough at *NLR*, Davis set to work establishing *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series*, initiatives that he and co-editor Michael Sprinker hoped would fill a similar gap in Verso's publishing catalogue. Sprinker – who received a PhD in English from Princeton aged 25 and moved straight into a career as a literary theorist and critic working at Oregon State University and subsequently SUNY Stony Brook – was more of a bona fide academic than Davis. Nonetheless, he had a no less radical set of political credentials, forging a reputation as an Althusserian Marxist in his scholarly work, and playing a role as an activist in the New American Movement, a socialist-feminist group founded in 1971 that traced its roots back to SDS but merged in 1982 with Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialist Organizing Group to form Democratic Socialists of America. Much like Davis, he forged links with the *NLR* and Verso editorial collectives during an extended visit to London in 1982-83, and it was out of this transatlantic nexus of relationships that *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* ultimately developed.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Cohen, "The Left Coast" pp. 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?* p. 214 (n).

<sup>28</sup> See Alan Wald, "Committed to the End: Michael Sprinker, 1950-1999" in *Cultural Logic: An Electronic Journal of Marxist Theory and Practice* 3:1 (Fall 1999) <<http://clogic.eserver.org/3-1&2/3->

The first volume of *The Year Left*, published in 1985, was subtitled “An American Socialist Yearbook”, and its editors (Davis, Sprinker, and Fred Pfeil) laid out their intentions in a “Statement of Purpose”:

We are launching this first instalment of *The Year Left* with a sense of the overriding and immediate necessity for new analyses by and for the American left – analyses and initiatives shaped by the specificity of the historical moment that North America has now definitively entered.<sup>29</sup>

The “historical moment” referred to was defined by Ronald Reagan’s triumphant election to a second Presidential term, a victory that many on the left had actively sought to prevent. Reagan’s malevolent influence was, the editors argued, not *only* a problem for the U.S. left, as they made clear in reminding their readers of words uttered by a Salvadoran activist soon after his election: “Your President is our President, too.”<sup>30</sup> The complex, interconnected nature of the late Cold War conjuncture demanded that *The Year Left* be “genuinely ‘North American’ in both a geographical and conceptual sense.”<sup>31</sup> The yearbook was therefore designed as a forum in which leftists throughout the Americas could bring the specificities of their own national struggles into dialogue to produce a shared political outlook. *The Haymarket Series* was established soon after *The Year Left* to offer “original studies of politics, history and culture focused on North America.” The introductory notes for each volume in the series suggested that it would “present innovative but

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1%262.html> (accessed 9 August 2011). For a brief overview of the early history of the New American Movement, see Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2006) pp.118-121.

<sup>29</sup> Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. vii.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. viii.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. viii.

representative views from across the American left on a wide range of topics of current and continuing interest to socialists in North America and throughout the world.” Named to commemorate the deaths of the “martyrs” who died in the Haymarket massacre of 1886, the studies in the series would “testify to the living legacy of activism and political commitment for which they gave their lives.”<sup>32</sup>

Whilst no specific mention of solidarity was made in the rationale for the Haymarket Series, its references to “North America” should be interpreted as broadly as those in *The Year Left*. This becomes clear upon brief examination of the first title released in the series: Davis’s own *Prisoners of the American Dream*. As its subtitle suggested, the book’s main focus was “politics and economy in the history of the U.S. working class.” However, Davis peppered his analysis of U.S. industrial and social history with the language and discourse of internationalism. “It is a central thesis of this book”, he argued in its Foreword, “that the future of the left in the United States is more than ever before bound up with its ability to organise solidarity with revolutionary struggles against American imperialism.”<sup>33</sup> Later, Davis unconsciously echoed Walter LaFeber by arguing, “democracy in present-day Central America has become an essentially *revolutionary* goal”.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, he reached a significantly more radical conclusion than the left-liberal historian when he suggested,

If socialism is to arrive one day in North America, it is much more probable that it will be by virtue of a combined, hemispheric process of revolt that overlaps boundaries and interlaces movements...It is necessary to begin to imagine more audacious projects of coordinated action and political cooperation among the popular

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<sup>32</sup> All of the quotations in this paragraph are taken from the introductory notes that appeared in every volume published as a part of *The Haymarket Series*.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the U.S. Working Class* (London: Verso, 1986).p. ix.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 205.

lefts in all the countries of the Americas. We are all, finally, prisoners of the same malign 'American Dream'.<sup>35</sup>

Davis's approach to internationalism highlights the manner in which *The Haymarket Series* was a discursive platform from which arguments for solidarity could be articulated from a range of perspectives. It also demonstrates the vital importance of anti-interventionism to Verso's U.S. projects. Davis's text was not centrally concerned with U.S. involvement in Central America, but it formed a key issue in his analysis nonetheless.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, he has since suggested that one of the immediate priorities in setting up the series was "to recover the CISPES experience".<sup>37</sup> This helps to demonstrate that whilst discourses of solidarity were by no means the only ideas explored in the essays and books published under the aegis of *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series*, they were some of the most significant.

The editors of the two series also had to negotiate the difficult question of exactly who their audience would be. *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* planned to bridge the gap between academic and trade readerships, and were produced and promoted with this goal in mind. The texts in the two series were designed with bright, eye-catching jackets that incorporated striking images of 1980s America, and therefore stood in stark contrast to the majority of the books published by NLB in the 1970s and early 1980s, the designs of which made very few concessions to trade audiences. For example, NLB/Verso regularly sought to promote its products in the left-wing U.S. journal *In These Times*. Figure 1 (below), which dates from 1979, is a good illustration of NLB's typical promotional material. It

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 314.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it was even dedicated to "the combatants of the FMLN". See *ibid.* p. vi.

<sup>37</sup> Author's personal email correspondence with Mike Davis (December 14, 2010).



consists solely of text, with very little attention to aesthetic qualities, and no illustrations. It also highlights the imprint's concern with the "heavy hitters" of Western Marxist thought, focussing as it does on books by Ernest Mandel, Nicos Poulantzas and Erik Olin Wright, amongst others.

Contrastingly, the advertisements in Figures 2 and 3 exhibit a more visually oriented promotional strategy. Figure 2, which dates from 1985 and promotes the first volume of *The Year Left* as well as key *Haymarket Series* texts, uses two striking cover images in an attempt to capture the reader's attention, and relies on the use of large, bold text to provide the titles of the relevant books and a brief blurb relating to *The Year Left*, which reads:

*The Year Left* opens a space for extended debate and commentary on the present conjuncture of right-wing populism, militarism and jingoism, and the restructuring of the global political economy.

No mention is made of the fact that the majority of the contributors to the series are academics, and the very characterisation of the volume as an "American Socialist Yearbook" suggests a concern with attracting the type of left-wing readership that would purchase *In These Times*: those interested in reading extended analyses of U.S. politics, but not engaging directly with academic culture *per se*.

Figure 3, an advertisement for a *Haymarket Series* collection of articles written by radical journalist and doyen of the solidarity movement, Alexander Cockburn, follows a similarly populist strategy. First, the advertisement engages its audience directly, welcoming them to the book by stating, "read friends, and learn about...", before listing the text's main selling points. Second, its overall style and tone is humorous, with references to Cockburn's British lineage ("his ancestors burned down the White House; and now, Alexander Cockburn does it again"), and

ironic use of neoconservative critic Norman Podhoretz's vituperative remark that Cockburn had set "a new standard of gutter journalism" in the U.S.

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# NLB

BOOKS FROM SCHOCKEN

**Rudolf Bahro**  
**The Alternative in Eastern Europe**  
Bahro is a Marxist now serving eight years imprisonment in East Germany for his views. His book is a major theoretical synthesis whose aim is to explain the historical foundations of bureaucratic rule in Eastern Europe and to advance a political programme capable of overcoming it. Bahro's "alternative" — a set of proposals for establishing genuine socialism in such countries — is concrete, detailed and explosive. "Destined to become a classic."  
—*Times Literary Supplement*  
486pp \$19.50

**Paul Feyerabend**  
**Science in a Free Society**  
A sustained and original attack on the prestige of science in the west by the author of *Against Method*. Feyerabend insists that the lay population should control the views and decisions of scientists in a stimulating intellectual self-portrait, he describes the origin and development of his own views, and then replies to the many critics of his earlier work. "He is an audacious thinker, a brilliant polemicist, an iconoclast. This is an often exhilarating book."  
—*Publishers Weekly*  
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**A Marxist Analysis of Recession in the Seventies**  
Mandel locates the present recession in the context of the theory and history of capitalist crises, arguing that it is fundamentally a crisis of overproduction in which oil price rises of 1973 played only a secondary role. He analyses the economies of both capitalist and socialist countries and concludes with a programme for a socialist alternative to present government policies. "A very good book, persuasive, analytically penetrating and exceptionally well-informed."  
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**From Stalinism to Eurocommunism**  
A vigorous polemic against the doctrines and directions of Eurocommunism, containing critical analyses of the policies of each of the major European Communist Parties, their relationship to the USSR and their view of opposition in Eastern Europe. "Mandel outlines the left-wing case against Eurocommunism ... and being Mandel, he does it with great skill and panache."  
—*Guardian*  
226pp \$6.55 paperback/\$15.00 cloth

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Wright focuses on the most contentious problems of Marxist theory, first advancing a new class map of contemporary capitalist societies, then surveying the diverse classical theories of economic crisis, and finally discussing the great political problem of bureaucracy. "This book is highly relevant and provides both probing and informative discussions of contemporary capitalism as well as some strategies for significant structural change in the US. Highly recommended."  
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Poulantzas presents a critique of contemporary Marxist theories of the state, stressing the interpenetration of state and society and the existence of conflict within the state apparatuses themselves. He ends with original proposals for a socialist strategy in the developed capitalist countries.  
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Figure 1. NLB advertisement, *In These Times*, February 28-March 6, 1979 p. 8.

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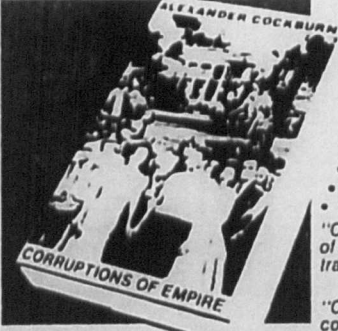
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Figure 2. Verso advertisement, *In These Times*, December 11-17, 1985 p. 16.

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Figure 3. Verso advertisement, *In These Times*, November 11-17, 1987 p. 17.

These advertisements provide an insight into the changes that took place during the 1980s as “NLB” permanently changed its identity to become “Verso”. In doing so, it shed its sober image as an imprint solely concerned with philosophical and theoretical work (although the publication of critical theory titles remained central to its catalogue), and sought to show that it was equally interested in publishing books that bridged the divide between academic and trade audiences. Both *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* were part of this process, and, based on the diversity of journals and magazines publishing reviews of texts in the two series, met with some success.<sup>38</sup> During the same period, the company moved away from a UK-based model

<sup>38</sup> Issues of *The Year Left* and books in *The Haymarket Series* received reviews in academic journals such as *International Affairs*, *History Workshop* and *The American Political Science Review*, but also gained praise in publications with less specialised audiences, such as radical New York weekly the *Guardian*, and left-liberal magazine *The Nation*. Andrew Kopkind, an editor of the latter publication, gave *The Year Left* 2 a particularly glowing review in 1987, suggesting that, “so much coherent, focussed – dare one say rigorous? – discussion of political thought and action is rarely seen in one place, and the left should be thankful for such serious service.” See Joseph M. Jackson, untitled review

of distributing its titles in North America via Schoken Books, and established its own New York office to deal with U.S. editorial, sales, marketing and publicity. In this way, it opened up a space in which Verso, until this point a solely London-based company, could expand into the U.S. market, and use the credibility associated with the *NLR/NLB* brand in order to forge a North American identity. A central concern of this overarching project was the active promotion of consciously internationalist political projects – the Central America solidarity movement, for example.

### III.

In order to examine the discussions of solidarity that took place within the pages of *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series*, this chapter will now focus on a representative example of Verso's output during the 1980s: Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez's book *Fire in the Americas: Forging a Revolutionary Agenda*, which was published in 1987 as a part of *The Haymarket Series*. As well as seeking to reconstruct the context in which the book was written, the chapter highlights the manner in which many of the ideas contained within it intersected with those expressed elsewhere in the two series, so as to more accurately map the coordinates of the brand of internationalism articulated by Verso's U.S. projects.

Roger Burbach, who gained a PhD in Latin American history at Indiana University in 1975, was, by the time of the *Fire in the America's* publication,

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of *The Year Left* 3 in *International Affairs* 66:1 (January 1990) pp. 220-222; Bill Schwarz, untitled review of *The Year Left* 3 in *History Workshop* 28 (Autumn, 1989) pp. 182-185; Tobe Johnson, untitled review of Manning Marable, *Black American Politics* in *The American Political Science Review* 80:3 (September 1986) pp. 1027-1028; Dan Cohen, "The Unmaking of the U.S. Working Class" (review of Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*) in *Guardian* (Summer Book Supplement, 1986) p. S-12; Andrew Kopkind, "Seed and Conquest" (review of *The Year Left* 2) in *The Nation* (May 30, 1987) pp. 739-740.

employed at the Center for the Study of the Americas at the University of California, Berkeley, and had published a number of articles on Central American politics in the Third Worldist political journal *Monthly Review*.<sup>39</sup> Nuñez, on the other hand, was a Nicaraguan national involved with the study and implementation of agrarian reform in the aftermath of the Sandinista revolution. A result of transnational collaboration, then, *Fire in the Americas* was originally published in Spanish, and received the Carlos Fonseca Prize in 1987, at that point revolutionary Nicaragua's highest social science award. The authors quickly translated the text into English, with Mike Davis playing an integral role in helping to arrange its publication in the U.S. as the seventh instalment in *The Haymarket Series*.

At little over 100 pages, *Fire in the Americas* was not intended as a scholarly monograph. Instead, it formed an attempt to concisely set the agenda for debate amongst leftists in Central and North America. In his Foreword for the book's English translation, for example, Pablo González Casanova argued (somewhat hyperbolically) that it took its place "within...a revolution in thought", a "great epistemological break" in which leftists throughout the Americas were moving away from doctrinaire discussions of "correct" or "incorrect" revolutionary lines, and towards a more constructive engagement with political struggle in Central America.<sup>40</sup> As Gopal Balakrishnan has recently pointed out, one of the distinguishing features of the political manifesto as a literary genre is the manner in which it mobilizes "a de-linking from the present, from the status quo", and thereby offers up a singular

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<sup>39</sup> See Roger Burbach, "Nicaragua: The Course of the Revolution" in *Monthly Review* (February 1980) pp. 28-39; "Central America: The End of U.S. Hegemony?" in *Monthly Review* (January 1982) pp. 1-18; "Revolution and Reaction: U.S. Policy in Central America" in *Monthly Review* (June 1984) pp. 1-20.

<sup>40</sup> Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas: Forging a Revolutionary Agenda* (London: Verso, 1987) pp. ix-x.

rhetorical form that is capable of expressing “the conditions of possibility in bringing forth ‘the new’.”<sup>41</sup> Thought of in this way, *Fire in the Americas* can be read as a manifesto, laying out as it did a set of theoretical suppositions and practical proposals for the transnational social movement that centred its attention on forging solidarity with the struggles of the Central American left.

But how did Burbach and Nuñez’s text fit within the context provided by Verso’s two U.S. series, and what does this context tell us about the intellectual underpinnings of the solidarity movement? Section three of the second volume of *The Year Left*, entitled “Crisis in the Hemisphere”, was designed, according to its editors, to “survey” the conjuncture in Central America so as to aid “the long labour of understanding and ultimately transforming the major structures of oppression in the heartlands of the American imperium.”<sup>42</sup> This brief reference signals a broad concern throughout Verso’s U.S. initiatives with the development of an explanatory framework that could offer a detailed understanding of the crisis in the isthmus, even if the series were primarily concerned with theorising a political praxis that would help to transform hemispheric politics. An examination of the economic and political underpinnings of the approaches developed in *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* is therefore essential.

The first major analytical foundation of the two series grew out of a keen understanding of the differences between politics and culture in Central and North America. For example, in an essay in *The Year Left*, anthropologist Carol A. Smith sought to destabilise what she saw as the left’s over-reliance on class as an explanatory category by suggesting that, in the case of Guatemala, *ethnicity* was in

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<sup>41</sup> Gopal Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics* (London: Verso, 2009) pp. 268-269.

<sup>42</sup> Mike Davis et al (eds.), *The Year Left 2: Toward a Rainbow Socialism* (London: Verso, 1987) p. xiii.

fact the structuring dynamic in political life. Such a situation arose because the state was governed by a predominantly Latino grouping that took a racially inflected and uniformly repressive approach to Guatemala's indigenous population.<sup>43</sup> However, rather than rejecting a Marxist logic altogether, Smith argued that an analysis of Guatemalan politics needed to understand the nature of its civil society as one in which class struggle *did* exist, but not necessarily between classes whose interests could be defined in purely economic terms.<sup>44</sup>

This was an approach echoed by Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez. They argued that a "third force" existed within Central American oppositional politics that consisted of "distinctive constituencies" that could not necessarily be defined in strict class terms. Again, in such an analysis "ethnic Others", as well as radicalised Christians and other social movements, were regarded as vitally important groups whose politics were not yet fully understood by many activists in the U.S.<sup>45</sup> The key implication of such arguments, then, was that any radical political alternative to the status quo could not be realistically considered without an engagement with the numerous complexities of the region's various social and political make-ups.

Burbach and Nuñez signalled another major analytic theme of the two series when they questioned the logic of the dependency theory that held sway in many left wing academic circles during the 1960s and 1970s. They suggested that the inter-American debate over dependency theory had focused on "issues relating to the political economy of capitalism", but had contributed very little to the understanding

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<sup>43</sup> Carol A. Smith, "Culture and Community: The Language of Class in Guatemala" in Mike Davis et al (eds.), *The Year Left 2: Toward a Rainbow Socialism* (London: Verso, 1987) p. 205.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p. 214.

<sup>45</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* pp. 64-67.

of “concrete political processes.”<sup>46</sup> Indeed, this was a criticism that had already been made in the pages of *The Year Left*.<sup>47</sup> In the yearbook’s second volume, economists Marc W. Herold and Nicholas Kozlov had attacked the influential “New International Division of Labour” (NIDL) theory, which had been developed during the early 1980s. They suggested that the theory’s central problem, one it shared with the dependency theories it sought to replace, was its “neglect of internal class relations” in Central American economies.<sup>48</sup> “Our approach”, the authors argued,

seeks to affirm the effectivity of contradictions and developments *internal* to social formations, as opposed to the dependency and NIDL perspectives, which stress determination by *external* forces. Whereas for the dependency school, the relevant external factor was the state of dependency imposed by one *nation* on another, the NIDL theoreticians believe they have found a new ‘dependence’ rooted in the activities of *multinational corporations*.<sup>49</sup>

This focus on external determination conferred on dependency and NIDL theories “a nationalist character and a longing for a frustrated autonomous development.”<sup>50</sup> Instead, it was suggested that Third World economies needed to be understood as part of a *global* system of class-based capitalist expansion that was never confined within national boundaries.<sup>51</sup> This lack of faith in contemporary economic theory actually signalled a move in the opposite direction to the stress on Central American difference noted above. In this case, a class-based, traditionally

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<sup>46</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, lengthy discussion of the relevance/utility of dependency theory had also taken place in the pages of *NLR* during the 1970s and early 1980s. See, for example, Laclau, “Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America” and Cardoso, “Dependency and Development in Latin America”.

<sup>48</sup> Marc W. Herold and Nicholas Kozlov, “A New International Division of Labour? The Caribbean Example” in Mike Davis et al (eds.), *The Year Left 2: Toward a Rainbow Socialism* (London: Verso, 1987) p. 219.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 221.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 222.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 225.



Marxist approach was deemed more, rather than less, important than in previous scholarship. However, the overall lesson was the same: the American left needed to learn more, and in more detail, about the configuration of forces any politics of solidarity would have to resist.

The final structural dynamic regularly highlighted in *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* was that of Reaganism itself. Aline Frambes-Buxeda, for example, argued in *The Year Left* that Puerto Rico, often overlooked in analyses of Central American politics, was being used as a “staging ground” for what she saw as the four main elements of the Reaganite project. She suggested that “a new and more extreme social polarisation” was combining with “venal entrepreneurialism”, a militaristic “Rambo stridency” and “creeping state terrorism” on the island, and that these were the main building blocks of the Puerto Rican “model” Reagan was hoping to export throughout the isthmus with his interventionist foreign policy.<sup>52</sup>

These points can be closely linked to Mike Davis’s earlier suggestion, in *Prisoners of the American Dream*, that a “New Cold War” had been initiated by the Reagan administration, which had “called forth an overarching program of geomilitary expansion” with the aim of creating “nothing less than omniscient U.S. interventionism.”<sup>53</sup> Indeed, the genesis of this position can be traced even further back through Verso’s catalogue to the publication of Fred Halliday’s *The Making of the Second Cold War* in 1983, in which the international relations scholar suggested that a new era had emerged in post-war history after the election of Reagan. This “second Cold War” was characterised by mounting tension and confrontation between the superpowers, justified on both sides by “threat and challenge, self-justification and

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<sup>52</sup> Aline Frambes-Buxeda, “Puerto Rico Under the Reagan Doctrine” in Mike Davis et al (eds.), *The Year Left 2: Toward a Rainbow Socialism* (London: Verso, 1987) pp. 242-250.

<sup>53</sup> Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream* p. 181.

vilification of the other.”<sup>54</sup> The anti-interventionist print culture established by Verso’s engagement with American topics was therefore based on a view of Reaganism as a world political force that, whilst not without precedent in the history of American empire, represented a new and more extreme form of expansionism, intent on asserting its neoconservative agenda throughout Central America.

But how were such structures of imperial domination to be resisted? This was the most important question that *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* sought to answer. The first problem was to establish whether or not an engagement with U.S. electoral politics could form a fruitful oppositional strategy. Volume one of *The Year Left* was published soon after Ronald Reagan’s second inauguration in 1985, and the issue of electoralism was placed front and centre. In the volume’s opening essay, Manning Marable suggested that electoralism *could* play a significant role in for the U.S. left, if they were able to build “a permanent coalition of social groups” that would remain independent from the Democratic Party.<sup>55</sup> The essay, as well as his *Haymarket Series* book *Black American Politics* (1985), drew inspiration from the 1984 campaign of Jesse Jackson, which had united certain groups on the left in support of Jackson’s challenge for the Democratic Presidential nomination. Marable argued that in drawing together his “Rainbow Coalition”, Jackson had proved that “when Black political movements express their own objective interests, they speak not only for the masses of Afro-Americans, but for all of the oppressed.”<sup>56</sup> In this view, then, the popular force of Jackson’s campaign, which was mounted within the

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<sup>54</sup> Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War* (London: Verso, 1983) p. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Manning Marable, “Race and Realignment in American Politics” in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. 24.

<sup>56</sup> Manning Marable, *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson* (London: Verso, 1985) p. ix.

boundaries of official Democratic politics, easily had the potential to transcend narrow electoralism and become a mass movement.

This was a position with which Robert Brenner, author of the volume's second essay, strongly disagreed. He suggested that the "paradox of American social democracy" had led to a situation in which,

On the one hand...the expansion of working-class self-organisation, power and political consciousness...has provided *the* critical condition for the success of reformism as well as of the far left. On the other hand...its core representatives...have invariably sought to implement policies reflecting *their own* distinctive social positions and interest – positions which are *separate from* and interests which are...*opposed to* those of the working class.<sup>57</sup>

This complex conjuncture, which Brenner argued the U.S. left did not fully understand, deemed any electoralist strategy essentially null and void, as those who were elected to represent the interests of oppressed groups would always end up contradicting that goal. As a consequence, Marable's characterisation of Jackson's coalition as a "vanguard of the left" was, in Brenner's view, entirely misplaced.<sup>58</sup> "By conflating electoralism and program mongering with movement building", he argued, "Marable perpetuates the myth that winning office is winning power, and that there is a shortcut to the long, hard and daunting task of rebuilding the movements."<sup>59</sup> This disagreement strikes yet again at the heart of the underlying difference identified in Chapter 1 between the politics of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko. Put simply, the essential question was whether or not the left should retain any faith in the ability of

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<sup>57</sup> Robert Brenner, "The Paradox of Social Democracy: American Case" in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. 36.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 79.

America's existing democratic institutions to usher in new, emancipatory political forms.

*Fire in the Americas* contributed a hemispheric perspective to this debate by arguing against the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy that suggested liberal democracy to be an inherently bourgeois form of government. Instead, Burbach and Nuñez maintained that democratic ideals and aspirations were at the centre of the “ideological battle” between capitalism and socialism.<sup>60</sup> “There will be few easy targets like Batista, Somoza, or Duvalier”, they averred, continuing,

in many parts of the Third World the struggle will be fought over democracy, over whether the United States and its reformist allies – be they Duarte in El Salvador or Aquino in the Philippines – can contain the democratic aspirations of the masses and prevent revolutionary alternatives from developing. And the left, to meet this new challenge, will have to take up the democratic banner in a way that it never has before.<sup>61</sup>

In this formulation, there was a certain type of democracy that was essentially imperialist in nature, “managed” by U.S. intervention to ensure results that were pleasing to Washington. This was the type of sham democracy to which the left could provide an alternative, but not by attempting to establish a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Rather, what was needed was a revolutionary “pluralism” that recognised the vital importance of competing voices within a framework that sought to challenge the damaging influence of American intervention.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, it was precisely this formulation that won the book wider praise in the form of a review in the *Guardian*, a radical New York weekly newspaper that was dedicated to building the Central

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<sup>60</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 41.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p. 52.

America solidarity movement, which suggested that the text's primary value resided in its promotion of democratic pluralism from *within* the Marxist fold.<sup>63</sup>

Another important theme in both of Verso's series centred on a discussion of the continuing utility of the work of Régis Debray. In 1967, at the behest of Fidel Castro, Debray published a short work entitled *Revolution in the Revolution?* which collected his thoughts on the importance of the Cuban Revolution for those oppositional groups throughout Latin America that were seeking to recreate its anti-imperialist achievements.<sup>64</sup> The book, which rapidly became an influential manual of guerrilla warfare, asserted that there were certain "truths, of a technical, tactical and even of a strategic order" that could be learnt from detailed study of Castro's overthrow of the Batista regime.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps the most important of these was Debray's argument that "in Latin America today, a political line, which, in terms of its consequences, is not susceptible to expression as a precise and consistent military line, cannot be considered revolutionary."<sup>66</sup> This necessitated the establishment of military "*focos*", or small, highly trained revolutionary cadres, which would fulfil the role of vanguard by "confronting imperialism with acts and not merely with words."<sup>67</sup> Debray's close links with Castro, as well as with Che Guevara, gave the Frenchman's theories a currency they perhaps would not have otherwise garnered. But, as Burbach

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Camejo and John Trinkl, "A Challenge: To Find a Democratic, Pluralist Marxism" (review of *Fire in the Americas*) in *Guardian* (Summer 1988 Book Supplement) p. S-16.

<sup>64</sup> In his autobiography, Debray tells of the felicitous circumstances that drew him into Castro's sphere of influence. He had published a brief essay on the Cuban Revolution and its meanings for Latin America as a whole in the January 1965 issue of Jean-Paul Sartre's French journal, *Les Temps Modernes*. A copy of the piece found its way into the hands of Che Guevara, who translated it for Castro. Impressed, the Cuban leader sent for Debray because he seemed to have "a sound grasp of the difficulties of urban and the advantages of rural guerrilla warfare." He then spent a number of years in Cuba, before travelling to Bolivia with Guevara. *Revolution in the Revolution?* was, in significant part, the result of these experiences. See Régis Debray, *Praised be our Lords: A Political Education* (London: Verso, 2007) pp. 28-29.

<sup>65</sup> Régis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution?* (London: Penguin, 1967) p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 24-25.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* p. 126.

and Nuñez were keen to point out, “the defeat in the 1960s of guerrilla movements in Guatemala, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Brazil...demonstrates that it requires much more than a small band of guerrillas to overthrow an established order buttressed by the U.S.A.” This meant that, in a changed political climate, new tactics were needed to resist Central America’s *ancien régime*.<sup>68</sup>

One of the main underpinnings of these new tactics was a commonly held scepticism towards political and theoretical dogma. Such an approach sought to resist strict adherence not only to theories such as Debray’s, but also those of more traditional Marxism-Leninism. As Paul Buhle put it in his history of Marxism in America, which was published as a part of *The Haymarket Series*, this new approach was based on an ecumenical understanding that “Marxism is as Marxism does”, and that those groups in Central America who embraced various strands of revolutionary thought had “just as much claim to the mantle as Trotsky, Mao or Marx himself.”<sup>69</sup> This line was reinforced by Carol A. Smith in *The Year Left*, who, in conclusion to her essay on indigenous communities in Guatemala, suggested that, “if Marxism is to become truly the theory of liberation in Latin America it must break free of the dogmatism that reduces age-old cultures of resistance to mere epiphenomena of objectivised class struggles.”<sup>70</sup> In making the case for a Marxist praxis that was responsive to local conditions, and not ridden by the intense factionalism of the past, both Buhle and Smith were striking similar intellectual and political chords.

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<sup>68</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 3. In fact, Debray himself had reached a not dissimilar conclusion a number of years earlier. After a series of conversations with then Chilean President Salvador Allende, he sounded a note of cautious optimism regarding the legal, rather than military, route to power. Electoralism, the Chilean example forced him to admit, did have the potential to give birth “to a really new society freed from exploitation and foreign domination.” See Debray, *Conversations with Allende* p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso) p. 16.

<sup>70</sup> Smith, “Culture and Community” p. 217.

Burbach and Nuñez furthered this argument, but shifted the emphasis to a more constructive engagement with the topic of political praxis. The authors suggested, again contra Debray, that the key lesson to be learnt from the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions was not one relating to the use of explicitly military tactics. Rather, it was vital to realise that success came about in each case because revolutionary leaders were able to draw on the “radical political traditions of their own countries to come up with successful strategies for seizing power.”<sup>71</sup> Castro and his followers often referred to the example of nineteenth-century theorist of Cuban independence Jose Marti, and in Nicaragua, the revolutionary movement drew its name from Augusto Sandino, the leader of resistance to U.S. imperial presence in the country during the late 1920s and early 1930s. These distinctly *national* examples of revolutionary praxis needed to be borne in mind so that anti-interventionist movements could remain “constantly on guard,” and avoid turning potentially valuable theory into dogma.<sup>72</sup>

But perhaps the most important contribution made by Burbach and Nuñez was the concept of the “fourth force”. The authors’ theoretical division of the left into various forces has already been briefly referenced, but a fuller examination of its implications is worthwhile. The schema set forth in *Fire in the Americas* originated in a conventional Marxist observation: that the primary revolutionary force in any society was the working class. Burbach and Nuñez supplemented this starting point with a dose of Leninism, suggesting that the second revolutionary force was formed by the peasant classes, which, while they often retained some structural similarities with the working class, had a fundamentally divergent experience of capitalism, and,

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<sup>71</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 39.

in almost every Latin American society, constituted the “largest social force”. This fact necessitated the formation of “a worker-peasant alliance as the central axis for revolutionary struggle.”<sup>73</sup> Such a bloc was defined as the “*historic subject* of all popular revolutions”, consisting as it did of the social groupings that were “destined by history to form the antithesis of capitalism while that system exists.”<sup>74</sup> Building on this theoretical foundation, though, Burbach and Nuñez introduced the concept of the third force, which was derived from an essentially New Leftist view of social change. The third force consisted of an amorphous amalgamation of intellectuals, students, ethnic others and religious communities that cohered together to shape the “*social subject* of all revolutions”, or those groups that, while not inherently opposed to capital because of their social status, were, for various reasons, compelled to “incorporate themselves into any revolutionary project.”<sup>75</sup>

Up until this point, then, Burbach and Nuñez had done little more than ventriloquise the arguments of the Old and New lefts. In articulating their concept of the fourth force, however, they went a step further and sought to make an original contribution to socialist strategy. The forth force, they argued, was formed by the international solidarity movements that had grown out of the Cuban Revolution and developed full coherence in response to the 1973 coup in Chile and the success of the Nicaraguan revolution in 1979. Burbach and Nuñez went as far as suggesting that the very success of the Sandinista revolution “owed almost as much to the mobilisation of international forces and pressures against the Somoza regime as it did to the internal upheaval within Nicaragua.”<sup>76</sup> Operating at the grass roots, then, and with networks

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. pp. 8-9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. pp. 81-83.



that were all but unimpeded by national boundaries, the Central America solidarity movement was theorised as a core force within the international left, one that was essentially independent from the struggles of workers, peasants and the third force, but that helped to establish a concrete internationalist sensibility amongst activists throughout the Americas.

This idea was taken up in a *Year Left* essay discussing the history of U.S.-based solidarity activism. Written by CISPES activist Van Gosse, the piece detailed the roots of the 1980s movement in earlier struggles against U.S. involvement in Cuba and Chile. However, Gosse suggested that, rather than being enmeshed in the sectarian rivalries of the U.S. left, solidarity activism distinguished itself by

responding directly to the immediate conjunctures and long-term dynamics of revolutionary processes as defined by the organisations representing the people that (individual activist groups) support. The solidarity group itself was defined ultimately as another sector in the war, and the United States as another front, no more and no less.<sup>77</sup>

In this formulation, then, the solidarity enacted by disparate activist groups such as CISPES and Witness for Peace was conceptualised as a pragmatic opposition to the specific political circumstances engendered by U.S. policy making in Central America, rather than an abstract and holistic opposition to imperialism or capitalism as global structures. This approach did not ignore the fact that many of those involved in the movement were firmly rooted in the political traditions of the anti-capitalist

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<sup>77</sup> Van Gosse, "The North American Front: Central American Solidarity in the Reagan Era" in Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (3<sup>rd</sup> Volume of "The Year Left") (London: Verso, 1988) p. 35.

left, but it did maintain that the goal of solidarity could not stand in as a substitute for broader struggles for social change.<sup>78</sup>

It seems clear, then, that the authors involved with *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* were drawn together around a group of key political and economic issues. A concrete analysis of the structures of domination used to enforce the imperial status quo was, in almost all cases, fused with the proposition of a left-wing praxis that was anti-dogmatic and democratic in spirit. These assertions formed the economic and political foundations for the concept of solidarity that developed out of the two series. A specific focus on the role played by the writing of Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez within this context also provides an insight into the manner in which these ideas intersected with the goals of the solidarity movement. Throughout the 1980s, there existed the potential for contradiction between those espousing solidarity as a means of ending U.S. intervention in Central American and those who believed it implied a much broader, revolutionary project. But Burbach and Nuñez's argument that it was necessary to fan the flames of "fire in the Americas" aimed to bridge the divide between these two positions. In their formulation, sweeping internationalist theory could not be understood without active engagement in political praxis. But the reverse was also true: the single issues attended to by traditional methods of activism needed to be related to broader struggles against the status quo, both North and South.

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<sup>78</sup> Van Gosse, "Active Engagement: The Legacy of Central America Solidarity" in *NACLA Report on the Americas* XXVIII:5 (March/April 1995) p.28.

#### IV.

In the Preface to the third volume of *The Year Left*, editors Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker reflected that, over and above economic and political analysis, one of the series' key aims had been "to explore the possibilities of a 'left public sphere' in the realm of popular culture."<sup>79</sup> The desire to forge an explicitly *cultural* politics was vital to their conception of what both *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* should be about, an attitude that decisively shaped the nature of the anti-interventionism debated in the pages of the two Verso series. The culturally inflected politics of solidarity that developed therefore took two major paths: a search for radical political possibility in popular culture, and an interest in the religious dimension of Central American anti-imperialism, as manifested in Liberation Theology.

This focus on questions of culture had been apparent since the first volume of *The Year Left* contained a section covering the relations between the region's politics and popular cultural forms. John Beverley, for example, had sought to show that poetry was "a materially decisive ideological practice" of various Central American revolutionary movements, citing the cases of Ernesto Cardenal and Roque Dalton, poets from Nicaragua and El Salvador respectively.<sup>80</sup> Taking up some of the core political issues expressed elsewhere in the series, Beverley showed that Cardenal fused religious imagery with Nicaraguan history in his poetry to create "an *ideology*, a new sort of revolutionary historicism that shuttles between...the raw data of history

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<sup>79</sup> Mike Davis and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *Reshaping the U.S. Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s* (3<sup>rd</sup> Volume of "The Year Left") (London: Verso, 1988) p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> John Beverley, "Poetry and Revolution in Central America" in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. 155.

and its transfiguration.”<sup>81</sup> Dalton’s poetry, on the other hand, was argued to reflect a “specifically Salvadoran national-popular ideology”, centred on an “aporia”:

on the one hand orthodox Marxism-Leninism – what Brecht liked to call the classics – is maintained as the ‘untranscendable horizon’ of praxis; on the other, deconstructive ironizing gives expression to the more sceptical, anti-dogmatic spirit of 60s leftism.<sup>82</sup>

Taking a different route through the terrain of popular culture, John McClure examined three literary figures whose work he believed provided guides to the “sights, sounds and significance” of the Caribbean Basin’s recent history: V. S. Naipaul, Joan Didion and Robert Stone.<sup>83</sup> He criticised Naipaul and Didion for attacking the politics of anti-interventionism in their books *Guerrillas* (1975) and *Salvador* (1983), suggesting that for each author there existed “no truly progressive forces” in Central America, and that none would emerge.<sup>84</sup> Stone’s novel *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), however, was shown to have created “intelligent and principled radicals” who were able to articulate a realistic and believable anti-interventionism. The three writers could therefore be used to teach what McClure called “lessons in liberation,” which would show activists how to articulate a radical anti-interventionism that could be taken seriously.<sup>85</sup>

This interest in the radical potential of popular culture was also reflected in references throughout Verso’s two series to political filmmaking. For example, in volume three of *The Year Left*, published in 1988, Van Gosse wrote of the important

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid, p. 169.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 175.

<sup>83</sup> John McClure, “Lessons in Liberation: The Fiction of V. S. Naipaul, Joan Didion and Robert Stone” in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. 181.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 191.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 198.

role in recruiting to groups such as CISPES played by the film *Revolution or Death* (unknown director, 1982). Its “martial, deeply stirring vanguardism” was argued to have dramatised emotionally the cause of Central American anti-interventionism for viewers.<sup>86</sup> Similarly, Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez posited that political filmmaking had become

a means for putting forth a progressive, and even revolutionary perspective, not only in countries like Brazil and Argentina, but also in the United States, where today Hollywood is willing to release progressive films like *Missing*, *Under Fire* and *Latino*.<sup>87</sup>

These references to film, as well as those to literature and poetry, are important at this stage less for what they say about the texts themselves, and more for what they say about the publication contexts in which they were written. That such engagements were evident in the pages of both *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* evidences an attempt to resist the traditional leftist notion that popular, easily digested cultural forms were inherently conservative. Instead, poetry, fiction and film were regarded as useful tools through which to further the political goals of the solidarity movement.

Perhaps the most unique cultural dimension of transnational anti-interventionism that emerged throughout the Americas during the late Cold War was an interest in religious, rather than popular, culture. Influenced by the 1968 Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín, Columbia and pioneered by Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian, the doctrines of Catholic Liberation Theology found their “starting place” in the poverty, degradation and repression of everyday life

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<sup>86</sup> Gosse, “The North American Front” p. 24.

<sup>87</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 101.

across Latin America.<sup>88</sup> Citing Frantz Fanon and Herbert Marcuse, as well as more traditional theological sources, Gutiérrez's ground-breaking work, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), argued that, "only authentic solidarity with the poor and...real protest...can provide the concrete, vital context necessary for a theological discussion of poverty."<sup>89</sup> Other influential liberation theologians shared the belief that theology needed to be directly linked to a tangible political project. In 1981, for example, Enrique Dussel suggested that the worldly system of sin was essentially grounded in "an empire of international, national, economic, political, cultural and sexual oppression".<sup>90</sup> The only way to break the power of this empire was to define theology as "a reflection on the praxis of the liberation of the oppressed".<sup>91</sup> This was a politicised theological discourse that Dussel believed was relevant not only to the people of Latin America, but to all those living in "peripheral" societies around the world.<sup>92</sup>

In many cases, the doctrines of Liberation Theology appealed to the Catholic masses because, at least at the local level, the Church was the only major institution that actively challenged the political, economic and social status quo. Proponents of Liberation Theology throughout Latin America established Base Ecclesial Communities, which provided space for discussions of the relationship between religion and politics, and enabled the voices of the continent's "little people" to be

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<sup>88</sup> Christopher Rowland, "The Theology of Liberation" in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (London: SCM Press, 1974) p. 302.

<sup>90</sup> Enrique Dussel, *A History of the Church in Latin America: Colonialism to Liberation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1981) p. 10.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 3. Dussel's use of the term shows an explicit knowledge of at least the most basic precepts of dependency theory.

heard.<sup>93</sup> Through such projects, the Catholic Church became a practical, as well as theoretical, outlet for political sentiment, playing an important role in the organisation of anti-imperialist political movements.

This was a development that several authors involved with *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* took very seriously. Paul Buhle and Thomas Fiehrer, for example, sought to defend Liberation Theology against its secular detractors in the North. In an essay in *The Year Left* they argued that “the sacred symbols of the liturgy” called forth by radical Catholic theologians drew the masses into a mobilised posture by “relating their religious vision of universal human equality to movements for temporal, political power.”<sup>94</sup> Buhle and Fiehrer also drew their readers’ attention to the Base Ecclesial Communities, which they described as important tools in the actualisation of religious struggle.<sup>95</sup> These views were echoed in Buhle’s later assertion in *Marxism in the United States* that Liberation Theology was an important theoretical alternative to dogmatic Marxism-Leninism.<sup>96</sup> Burbach and Nuñez were also keen to make a similar point, suggesting that Liberation Theology was so effective because it united “traditional spiritual values with advocacy of revolutionary change to end the exploitation of the poor.”<sup>97</sup> Progressive religious communities were therefore deemed a decisive constituency of the “third force” that would help to forge a revolutionary agenda throughout the Americas.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Rowland, “The Theology of Liberation” p. 6.

<sup>94</sup> Paul Buhle and Thomas Fiehrer, “Liberation Theology in Latin America: Dispensations Old and New” in Mike Davis, Fred Pfeil and Michael Sprinker (eds.), *The Year Left: An American Socialist Yearbook* (London: Verso, 1985) p. 224.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 226.

<sup>96</sup> Buhle, *Marxism in the United States* p. 261.

<sup>97</sup> Burbach and Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas* p. 68.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p. 64.

In a 1989 review of the first three volumes of *The Year Left* in *NLR*, Paul Buhle reflected that the series' attempts to address cultural issues, or "postmodernism's modes of consciousness and forms of cultural production", were just as significant as their attempts to develop an internationalist sensibility based on solidarity amongst lefts throughout the Americas.<sup>99</sup> This is undoubtedly the case, but it is also clear that several of the authors writing for the yearbook, as well as for *The Haymarket Series*, did not necessarily treat the two goals separately in the way that Buhle implied in his review. Indeed, issues of both popular and religious culture were key elements in their articulations of solidarity with revolutionary struggle in Central America. In this sense, both series directly engaged the rapidly developing interest of the 1980s U.S. academy in cultural issues and postmodernism, but at the same time gave this engagement an explicitly political focus by arguing for its importance to the broader effort to end U.S. intervention in the region.

## V.

For those involved in the U.S. Central America solidarity movement, the very term "solidarity" was a multi-faceted and slippery one. In certain circumstances, this versatility united activists espousing disparate and potentially contradictory political philosophies around a common cause. Nonetheless, during the latter half of the Reagan era, it became increasingly obvious that debate was needed over the intellectual underpinnings of the relationship between U.S. leftists and the revolutionary movements of Central America. Verso's *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* were designed as forums in which such a discussion could take

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<sup>99</sup> Paul Buhle, "Between Bad Times and Better" in *New Left Review* 1/175 (May-June 1989) p. 97.



place, and therefore aimed to provide significant intellectual underpinning for the Central America solidarity movement, as well as various other internationalist movements of the period.

The origins of the two series in the transatlantic history of the New Left, as well as the manner in which they circulated within the public sphere, therefore highlight the importance of transnational exchange within this context, whether between leftists in the U.K. and the U.S. (in the case of Verso's relationship with its series' editors), or between those in the U.S. and Central America (as exemplified in the authorship of *Fire in the Americas*). It also demonstrates the manner in which NLB/Verso reached out to trade as well as academic audiences during the 1980s. Furthermore, examination of *The Year Left* and *The Haymarket Series* reinforces one of the key arguments of this thesis concerning the cultural context of 1980s U.S. leftism. While the books and essays released as part of the series were promoted and reviewed in scholarly publications, they also gained a reception in the wider left-wing press. Those involved were able to use the two series to present intellectual work that built on scholarly erudition, but, at the same time, engaged an audience beyond the academy. The public the two series addressed was therefore very different to that of Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko, who aimed their work at a general, rather than specifically activist, readership. But what the subjects of Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 had in common was an aspiration to use their anti-interventionist arguments to speak to communities outside the boundaries of their specific academic disciplines, in order to challenge U.S. policy in Central America, and to stand in solidarity with the region's revolutionary struggles.

**Section II: Press Culture**

## Chapter 3

### Liberal Anti-Interventionism at *The Nation*

In April 1985, Nicaragua's revolutionary government was about to enter its sixth year in power. Since the Sandinista regime's inception in the wake of the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, it had continually struggled against counterrevolutionary forces funded by the U.S. government and the CIA. In spite of these obstacles, the government had succeeded in holding an election in November of the previous year. The poll, which saw the ruling party comfortably defeat its rivals, was a significant step towards the consolidation of political support for the Sandinistas within the Nicaraguan political system. Yet even this success was not enough to convince President Daniel Ortega and the country's nine-man ruling directorate to end the state of emergency that had been instituted in March 1982 and only briefly relaxed during the election period. The primary motivation behind this decision stemmed from a belief that the risk to the revolutionary process posed by the reestablishment of full democratic freedoms was simply too great to be countenanced.<sup>1</sup>

Against this political backdrop, New York-based magazine *The Nation* published an article authored by freelance writer Michael Massing entitled "No Time for Orthodoxy: Hard Questions on Nicaragua". The piece criticised the history of American intervention in Central America before going on to condemn the U.S. left

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of Nicaraguan history in the years immediately before and after the revolution, from which these details are taken, see James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Central America* (London: Verso, 1988) pp. 221-334.

for its approach to revolutionary upheaval in the region. In the case of Nicaragua, Massing asserted that the left should “intensify efforts to bring the truth to the American people”, but suggested that in the past efforts along these lines had been reductively anti-interventionist, encouraging those opposed to intervention to erroneously see *everything* that occurred inside the country “through the prism of U.S. aggression.”<sup>2</sup> Massing suggested that the American left ask itself a simple question: “given Washington’s demonstrated ability to undo revolutions in the hemisphere, would the Sandinistas be better off pursuing a policy of accommodation?”<sup>3</sup> On the surface, Massing’s article comprised a small part of *The Nation*’s coverage of Central American politics during the late Cold War. However, in an attempt to spark debate on the topics it covered, the magazine’s editor, Victor Navasky, took the unusual step of openly inviting readers to comment.

A fortnight later, the reactions of a number of prominent academics and journalists appeared under the title “Responses to Michael Massing: The U.S. Left and Nicaragua”. Feedback varied from celebration of Massing’s argument for critical engagement with the internal politics of the Sandinista regime as the only way to avoid “genuflection in the direction of Managua,”<sup>4</sup> to condemnation of his “mistaken assumption...that moderation is an insurance policy against destabilisation.”<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most vituperative rejoinder came from Alexander Cockburn, who used his

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Massing, “No Time for Orthodoxy: Hard Questions on Nicaragua” in *The Nation* (April 6, 1985) p. 396.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 398.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Davis in “Responses to Michael Massing: The U.S. Left and Nicaragua” in *The Nation* (April 20, 1985) p. 457.

<sup>5</sup> Holly Sklar in *ibid.* p. 460.

fortnightly “Beat the Devil” column to accuse Massing of standing “side by side with Reagan” in his arguments against Sandinista radicalism.<sup>6</sup>

Established in 1865 by a group of abolitionists who had inherited the subscription list of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, *The Nation* originally had a dual aim: to secure full civil rights for freedmen in the aftermath of the Civil War, and to pursue the reform of American journalism.<sup>7</sup> Under the initial editorship of E. L. Godkin, the magazine viewed left-wing politics with suspicion, choosing to set itself in the mould of classical English liberalism whilst looking upon the socialist movement as “something to be stopped.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, *The Nation* only began to consciously espouse a left-leaning politics when Oswald Garrison Villard – a founding member of the NAACP and staunch critic of the 1898 Spanish American War – became editor in 1918.<sup>9</sup> The magazine moved further to the left under the editorship of Freda Kirchwey (1933-1955), during which time it took up the Depression-era political mantle of fellow travelling anti-fascism.<sup>10</sup> After 1945, attention shifted to “an assessment of Cold War issues from an independent point of view,”<sup>11</sup> leading *The Nation* into confrontation with those in the New York intellectual community who turned towards anti-communism and neoconservatism in

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<sup>6</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Beat the Devil” in *The Nation* (April 20, 1985) p. 454.

<sup>7</sup> Carey McWilliams, “Introduction” in Henry M. Christman, *One Hundred Years of The Nation: A Centennial Anthology* (New York: MacMillan, 1965) p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Victor S. Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2005) pp. 156-157.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 159.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 163-165. Indeed, William L. O’Neill has unsympathetically characterised the Kirchwey-era *Nation* as “an organ of the popular front”. See William L. O’Neill, *A Better World: The Great Schism, Stalinism and the American Intellectuals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) p. 14. For a detailed biography of Kirchwey, see Sara Alpern, *Freda Kirchwey: A Woman of the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Carey McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) p. 157.

the post-war period.<sup>12</sup> In subsequent years, the views of such diverse influences on the 1960s New Left and counterculture as C. Wright Mills, Hunter S. Thompson and Theodore Roszak were published in the magazine's pages, as well as those of revisionist historians William Appleman Williams, Howard Zinn, Gabriel Kolko and Walter LaFeber.<sup>13</sup> Strongly couched opposition to imperial excursions in Cuba and Vietnam followed, and in 1968 *The Nation* became an intellectual rallying ground for Eugene McCarthy's anti-war presidential campaign.<sup>14</sup>

In the period between 1977 and 1990, *The Nation*'s circulation grew enormously, from approximately 20,000 to 175,000.<sup>15</sup> Along with its bimonthly competitor, *Mother Jones*, these figures meant that the magazine was one of the most significant publications targeted at left-wing readers during the 1980s. The magazine's editors aimed their product at various activist communities, not least the Central America solidarity movement. For example, the publication paid for advertisements in CISPES publications,<sup>16</sup> and, in 1981, it published a pamphlet entitled *El Salvador: The Roots of Intervention*, which collected several articles from the magazine and was designed to be distributed cheaply amongst activists.<sup>17</sup> In turn,

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<sup>12</sup> McWilliams picks out Irving Kristol, Sidney Hook and Granville Hicks in particular, arguing, "if there was one publication (they) detested and were determined to discredit and silence if possible, it was *The Nation*." Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, C. Wright Mills, "The Balance of Blame" in *The Nation* (June 18, 1960) pp. 523-531; Hunter S. Thompson, "Losers and Outsiders" in *The Nation* (May 17, 1965) pp. 522-526; Theodore Roszak, "Youth and the Great Refusal" in *The Nation* (March 25, 1968) pp. 400-407; William Appleman Williams, "American Century, 1941-1957" (November 2, 1957) pp. 297-301; Howard Zinn, "The Force of Non-Violence" in *The Nation* (March 17, 1962) pp. 227-233; Gabriel Kolko, "Universities and the Pentagon" in *The Nation* (October 9, 1967) pp. 328-332; Walter LaFeber, "America's Long Dream in Asia" in *The Nation* (November 6, 1967) pp. 456-459.

<sup>14</sup> McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* p. 275.

<sup>15</sup> See Jude Wanniski (ed.), *1990 Media Guide: A Critical Review of the Media's Recent Coverage of the World Political Economy* (Montreal: Polyconomics Inc., 1990) p.143.

<sup>16</sup> "CISPES First National Convention Program" (1985) CISPES Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-308: Box 1, Folder 3 p. 41; "CISPES Second National Convention Program" (1987) Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 4, Folder 3.

<sup>17</sup> The Nation (eds.), *El Salvador: The Roots of Intervention* (New York: The Nation, 1981).

the movement came to see *The Nation* as an important source of ideas. CISPES repeatedly recommended that its members read the magazine's various special issues on Latin America, and solidarity publications frequently reprinted its articles.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, during the course of the 1980s, Alexander Cockburn, one of the magazine's most prominent writers, became a particular inspiration to radical journalists and solidarity activists alike.<sup>19</sup> An ideological circuit consequently developed between *The Nation* and the Central America solidarity movement, as the magazine demonstrated its ability to operate as, amongst other things, an anti-interventionist cultural resource.

Since leaving his position as editor in 1995, Navasky has suggested that the intellectual history of *The Nation* be characterised primarily as a "long running debate/argument/conversation between radicals and liberals."<sup>20</sup> This chapter seeks to interrogate this claim through analysis of the magazine's treatment of American involvement in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s. Two sections discuss the magazine's coverage of the U.S.-sponsored Chilean coup of 1973 and the Nicaraguan revolution of 1979. The first highlights its conscious and unstinting resistance to the line taken by the mainstream press, and examines the political consequences of this conception of the publication's institutional role within the culture of the left. The second section seeks to demonstrate the magazine's determined faith in the ability of

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<sup>18</sup> For recommendations of the *Nation*, see "CISPES Resource List" (12 September, 1981) Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 3, Folder 26. For article reprints, see Holly Burkhalter and Alita Paine, "Our Overseas Cops" in *Basta!* (February 1986) p. 29. *Basta!* was the newsletter of the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America.

<sup>19</sup> Cockburn's *Nation* articles were regularly reprinted in *Alert!*, the CISPES official magazine. See, for example, Alexander Cockburn, "The Days After: Great Opportunity" in *Alert!* (October 1984) pp. 7-8; Alexander Cockburn, "Politics of the Press" in *Alert!* (October 1985) pp. 2, 9. In 1989 Cockburn also embarked on a speaking tour entitled "Media, Government and Central America", which was enthusiastically advertised in *Central America Reporter*, the publication of the Massachusetts-based Central America Solidarity Association.

<sup>20</sup> Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion* p. 287.

American constitutional government, especially Congress, to achieve progressive political solutions throughout the Western hemisphere. Finally, a third section approaches *The Nation's* coverage of the Iran-Contra affair in order to examine how the themes identified in sections I and II came to manifest themselves in relation to a vital and comparatively under-examined event in the history of U.S. foreign policy.

The chapter also forms the first part of Section II of this thesis, entitled “Press Culture”, which, taken as a whole, seeks to reconstruct the relationship that developed between the left wing press and the Central America solidarity movement. Along with Chapter 4, which examines the treatment of U.S. policy towards El Salvador by radical newsweekly the *Guardian*, this chapter enters into a relatively under-studied subfield of U.S. intellectual history. Whilst excellent overviews of American journalism do exist, they inevitably cover the period 1979-1992 in a matter of pages.<sup>21</sup> Alternatively, research that *does* provide focussed analysis of oppositional media during the late Cold War either emphasises what Antonio Gramsci would have termed the “organic” journalism that emerged out of the era’s social movements,<sup>22</sup> or centres specifically on the American religious press.<sup>23</sup> Extant scholarship does not offer a reconstruction of the ways in which already established left-wing journalistic institutions reacted to American involvement in Latin America in the years after the formal demise of the New Left.

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<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Michael Emery, Edwin Emery and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2000) pp. 454-464.

<sup>22</sup> Bob Ostertag, *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 2006). In noting his interest in “the “accidental” journalists, who, out of a sense of social justice, volunteered to do whatever was needed for a particular cause and ended up as journalists” (p. 10), Ostertag comes close to highlighting the Gramscian dimension to his study, but never does so explicitly. For Gramsci’s discussion of the nature and importance of “organic intellectuals”, see Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals” in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (eds.), *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 5-14.

<sup>23</sup> Edward T. Brett, *The U.S. Catholic Press on Central America: From Cold War Anti-Communism to Social Justice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).



Whilst *The Nation* emphasised a legalistic, constitutional approach to anti-interventionism, albeit with regular nods to more radical viewpoints, the *Guardian* prioritised arguments in favour of direct action and movement building at the grass roots level. The varying ways the two publications approached the issue of Central America therefore sheds further light on the ideological underpinnings of 1980s anti-interventionist thinking. But it also demonstrates the important role played by the left wing press in promoting the development of solidarity activism. After all, as Benedict Anderson has argued in his pioneering study of the origin and spread of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (1991), the regular consumption of periodicals by a reading public has the potential to operate as a kind of “mass ceremony”, whose significance is ultimately paradoxical:

It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at...intervals throughout the calendar. What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned?<sup>24</sup>

Anderson’s notion of an “imagined community” drawn together by the processes of print-capitalism is relevant because it highlights how the periodical press can create psychological links between individuals committed to a specific political cause. Given that the solidarity movement treated both *The Nation* and the *Guardian* as important sources of news and opinion, the arguments put forth in their pages are therefore vital

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991) p. 35.

sources in any attempt to understand the cultural workings of 1980s anti-interventionist activism.

## I.

Throughout the history of the American left, intellectuals, journalists and activists have felt themselves to be involved in a struggle to oppose dominant voices within the mainstream media, not least during the rise of the 1960s New Left. Identifying a lack of accountability in the sphere of foreign policy caused by Cold War anti-communism, the movement sought to hold diplomatic elites to account through the provision of information hitherto unavailable to the American public. This conception of the role of the movement was spelt out explicitly in the opening editorial of *Studies on the Left* – published in 1959 and entitled “The Radicalism of Disclosure” – and came to a head in Noam Chomsky’s caustic and now-famous 1967 essay on “The Responsibility of Intellectuals”.<sup>25</sup> In this process, the “objectivity” of traditional sources of information was fundamentally questioned, leading to the advocacy of more direct, imaginative styles of journalism.<sup>26</sup> In this way, self-thematisation of its role within the public sphere became a key element of the New Left’s understanding of its oppositional function within American society.

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<sup>25</sup> “The Radicalism of Disclosure” in *Studies on the Left* 1:1 (Fall 1959) pp. 2-4; Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals” in *American Power and the New Mandarins* (New York: Pantheon, 1967) pp. 323-359.

<sup>26</sup> This trend was most obviously characterised in the development of “the New Journalism”, as practised by Tom Wolfe, Michael Herr, Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson, amongst others. Whilst they were rarely directly connected to the New Left, the New Journalists were heavily influenced by the upheaval of the 1960s, which encouraged them to adopt techniques previously neglected by mainstream journalism. The use of devices usually associated with the novel and short stories, marked subjectivity of voice and relationship to events, and a lack of deference to traditional sources and mainstream opinions were all characteristics that linked their work, leading Wolfe to claim that the new form of journalism would “wipe out the novel as literature’s main event.” See Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (London: Picador: 1975) p. 22. For an overview of the development of 1960s literary journalism, and the attendant rise of the nonfiction novel as characterised in the work of authors such as Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, see John Hollowell, *Fact and Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

As noted above, *The Nation* published the work of many of the authors who went on to become intellectual doyens of the 1960s movement. In doing so, the magazine was able to develop and maintain critical debate of U.S. foreign policy within its pages by drawing certain discourses and modes of analysis into play that were deemed vital in the struggle against American involvement in the Third World. However, this was not a mind-set that disappeared after the organisational collapse of the movement; indeed, its subsequent modifications are key to understanding the broad tenets of liberal anti-interventionism during the late Cold War. How, then, did this key motif manifest itself in the pages of *The Nation* during that period?

In September 1970, Salvador Allende was elected President of Chile at the head of the left-wing Popular Unity coalition. *The Nation's* treatment of Allende's three years in office was by no means uncritical.<sup>27</sup> Yet, a consistent element within its coverage was condemnation of the portrayal of Chilean politics in the mainstream U.S. media.<sup>28</sup> In January 1973, for example, John Pollock, a Rutgers University academic, criticised what he saw as "a consistent set of themes and omissions periodically evident in reporting on Chile ever since Allende's election."<sup>29</sup> These included: turning a blind eye to the improvements in Chilean society wrought by the

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<sup>27</sup> Probably the most balanced and in-depth analysis during the period came from Penny Lernoux, who in December 1972 blamed Allende's style of government itself as much as the "machinations" of multinational corporations and the CIA for the development of economic and social instability within Chile. See Penny Lernoux, "Allende's Chile: The Unresolved Revolution" in *The Nation* (December 11, 1972) pp. 587-591.

<sup>28</sup> The notion of a "mainstream" media is notoriously unreliable, and risks the connotations of a simplistic and pejorative left-wing put down. Indeed, it is even possible to imagine certain constituencies within the progressive political community conceiving of *The Nation's* liberalism as essentially in concert with the mainstream. However, in making use of the term here, I follow the work of Elaine Windrich, who has convincingly argued in another context that, especially in relation to press coverage of the Cold War, a broadly mainstream media consisting of newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as newsweeklies such as *Newsweek* and *Time*, did exist and can usefully be spoken of as a coherent grouping within the American public sphere. See Elaine Windrich, *The Cold War Guerrilla: Jonas Savimbi, the U.S. Media, and the Angolan War* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992) p. x.

<sup>29</sup> John Pollock, "Reporting on Chile: What the Press Leaves Out" in *The Nation* (January 29, 1973) p. 135.

Allende administration; ignoring right-wing extremism within the country; using caricatured “Cold War rhetoric and Stalinist stereotypes”; and showing an “interview bias” towards the middle classes and business leaders (natural opponents of Allende).<sup>30</sup> In conclusion, Pollock suggested that those covering Chile for U.S. newspapers should “willingly ask serious questions about the extent and legitimacy of the influence exercised in Chile by U.S. government agencies and transnational corporations.”<sup>31</sup>

Laurence R. Birns, a Latin America specialist at the New School for Social Research, struck a similar note two months after the coup. In an article entitled “Chile in *The Wall Street Journal*”, Birns focussed on the newspaper’s Latin American correspondent, Everett Martin, who had recently attacked apparently “colored” coverage of Chilean politics by academics in, amongst other publications, *The Nation*.<sup>32</sup> “Martin’s Chile”, Birns responded, “is a hermetic world, with its base in the American-flavored Carrera Hotel and largely cut off from the practical realities of the nation about which he is critically reporting.”<sup>33</sup> Such an approach, he argued, led the editorial board of *The Wall Street Journal* to become “apologists for a military regime”, with the paper’s coverage of Chile providing “a case study in distortion, ill will, condescension and amateurism.”<sup>34</sup> In both examples, *The Nation* was able to set itself the role of journalistic arbiter, courageously holding the mainstream press to account.

Critique of the media continued in *The Nation* as attention shifted in the late 1970s and early 1980s towards American involvement in Central America, and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. pp. 135-137.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. pp. 137-138.

<sup>32</sup> Laurence R. Birns, “Chile in *The Wall Street Journal*” in *The Nation* (December 3, 1973) p. 584.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 586.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. pp. 586-587.

Nicaragua in particular. Again attacking *The Wall Street Journal*, in 1981 Aryeh Neier, a member of the magazine's editorial board, charged that the paper was complicit in the machinations of the Reagan administration because it consistently sent out a familiar message: "subversives and their dupes are once again at work undermining American resolve and assisting the onward march of global communism."<sup>35</sup> In opposition to such a line, Neier forcefully asserted that, "Nicaragua is not the 'victim of a communist takeover.' It is the victim of several decades of oppression."<sup>36</sup> In his conception of the role of the press, it was necessary to directly connect opposition to American involvement in Central America with a challenge to the mainstream media's uncritical Cold War rhetoric.

In 1984, *The Nation* published a piece by Raymond Bonner, who had recently published *Weakness and Deceit*, a provocatively titled analysis of U.S. policy in and mainstream media coverage of El Salvador.<sup>37</sup> His article, entitled "A One-Sided Press", continued the critique initiated by Neier, arguing,

the Reagan Administration frequently rails against reporting from Central America, charging that it does not reflect the reality of the situation. The charge is accurate, but the distortions favor the Administration's policies rather than the other way around.<sup>38</sup>

For Bonner, it was the divergences between U.S. press coverage of the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan elections (1982 and 1984, respectively) that caused most concern. In making this case, he reiterated the arguments of an earlier essay published in the magazine by Edward S. Herman. In "El Salvador and Nicaragua: Tales of Two

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<sup>35</sup> Aryeh Neier, "Latin American Dominoes: Drawing the Line at the *WSJ*" in *The Nation* (November 14, 1981) p. 500.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 500.

<sup>37</sup> Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (London: Hamish and Hamilton, 1984).

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Bonner, "A One-Sided Press" in *The Nation* (November 8, 1984) p. 604.

Elections”, Herman, who would rise to prominence in 1988 after co-authoring *Manufacturing Consent* with Noam Chomsky,<sup>39</sup> argued that whereas the press concentrated on providing “election day hype” for the noticeably flawed Salvadoran poll, the Nicaraguan ballot, whilst significantly more democratic, was used by the media to “focus on the ‘hidden motives’ of the Sandinistas.”<sup>40</sup> Through the publication of such analysis, *The Nation* seemed to be advancing the view that the inadequate coverage of Latin American politics provided by the mainstream media impeded democracy not only in the U.S. itself, but also throughout Central America.<sup>41</sup>

This approach came to a head in 1984, with the introduction of Alexander Cockburn’s “Beat the Devil” column. Cockburn was born in Scotland in 1941, raised in Ireland, and graduated from Oxford University in 1963. A long-time editorial board member at the British journal *New Left Review*, he moved to the U.S. in 1973, and established his reputation as a radical, outspoken and contrarian journalist willing to skewer enemies on both left and right whilst writing for *Esquire*, *Harper’s* and *The Village Voice*.<sup>42</sup> Cockburn was introduced to readers in the February 18 edition of *The Nation* as “the country’s most insistent and insightful press critic,” with the magazine’s editors going on to note that “his stinging reports and critiques are a joy to read, and the press and public can ill afford to lose this trenchant, acerbic monitor” following his recent and controversial exit from *The Village Voice*.<sup>43</sup> Notwithstanding the obvious flattery afforded this high profile and notoriously volatile acquisition,

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<sup>39</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Edward S. Herman, “El Salvador and Nicaragua: Tales of Two Elections” in *The Nation* (March 31, 1984) p. 386.

<sup>41</sup> The 1982 Salvadoran elections were also given significant critical coverage in the *Guardian*, details of which can be found in Chapter 4.

<sup>42</sup> George Estrada Jr., “A Matter of Opinion: Progressive Columnists in Media Culture” PhD dissertation (University of Texas-Austin, 1997) p. 255.

<sup>43</sup> “About Cockburn” in *The Nation* (February 18, 1984) p. 179-180.

such an introduction signifies the importance to the magazine's self-image of its role as an institutional critic of the mainstream media. Indeed, even the title of Cockburn's column, "Beat the Devil," whilst drawn from that of a novel and screenplay penned by his journalist father, Claud Cockburn, stood as an early indication of the polemical approach he would take towards the news outlets he chose to scrutinise.

In the period leading up to the Iran-Contra affair, Cockburn took a number of opportunities to savage the press over its coverage of the Nicaraguan Revolution. His first victim was *New York Times* columnist Stephen Kinzer, a regular commentator on U.S. affairs in Central America.<sup>44</sup> Cockburn took aim at what he saw as Kinzer's

attempts to justify sabotage of Nicaragua with allegations that the Sandinistas are supplying the Salvadoran freedom fighters...I suppose he, like so many other *Times* folks in sensitive areas, is afraid of being marked as a Comsymp and banished to the salt mines of the business section.<sup>45</sup>

In December 1985, he launched a similarly vitriolic attack on Robert Leiken, another prominent commentator in the American press on Central America and some-time columnist for *The New York Times*. Chastising the mainstream media for having "abandoned all efforts to contradict or even challenge the propaganda put forth by the White House," he singled Leiken out as a "significant tactician in engineering liberal surrender" after a controversial volte-face written for *The New Republic*, which openly sided with the U.S.-backed Contras.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in 1982, Kinzer co-authored a book on American involvement in the 1954 Guatemalan coup. See Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York: Doubleday, 1982).

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil" in *The Nation* (April 14, 1984) pp. 502-503.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil" in *The Nation* (December 28, 1985/January 4, 1986) p. 702. See also Robert Leiken, "Nicaragua's Untold Stories" in *The New Republic* (October 8, 1984) pp. 16-22.

Cockburn suggested that in the face of such coverage, rather than waiting for an open declaration of war on Nicaragua by the Reagan administration, which many thought was inevitable, “the left should say outright that the U.S. has already declared war...and that all pledges of resistance are operational.”<sup>47</sup> In making this point, he made a knowing reference to the Pledge of Resistance movement, which, in the aftermath of Reagan’s invasion of Grenada in 1983, and under the assumption that a similar attack on Nicaragua was imminent, was established in 1984 in order to gather the signatures of U.S. citizens vowing to commit acts of civil disobedience in the event of such an offensive.<sup>48</sup> Such resistance was immediately necessary, Cockburn argued in a 1986 piece, because there were no “significant divisions among the ruling elites” in the U.S., and the mainstream press was therefore unable to fulfil the critical role demanded of it.<sup>49</sup> He suggested that this was especially important because, whilst Reagan had achieved an anti-Sandinista consensus in Washington, “poll after poll” had shown that he did not have “a national consensus” of popular opinion.<sup>50</sup>

Again, then, it is clear that a consistent assertion of opposition to the discourses of the mainstream media was key to *The Nation*’s coverage of American involvement in Nicaraguan politics. However, in picking out *The New York Times* as a regular subject of his critique, Cockburn went a step further than the writers cited above. Until his arrival, attacks had focussed on traditionally conservative newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal*. In refocusing the lens to capture *The New York Times* and what he saw as its weak-willed and duplicitous liberalism, Cockburn proved himself capable of going a step further than earlier contributors. At this stage,

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<sup>47</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Beat the Devil” in *The Nation* (March 9, 1985) p. 262.

<sup>48</sup> For the original “Pledge”, see Jim Wallis, “A Pledge of Resistance” in *Sojourner* (10 August 1984) pp. 10-11.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Beat the Devil” in *The Nation* (August 2/9, 1986) p. 70.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 71.



it is only worth noting such a point in passing, but as will become increasingly clear later in the chapter, it was an indication of serious divergence between Cockburn's conception of anti-interventionist politics and that put forth by *The Nation* as a whole.

In summing up his editorial philosophy at *The Nation*, Victor Navasky has indicated a certain affinity with the work of Jürgen Habermas by attributing to the German social theorist the argument that "every subscription list is essentially a political organization."<sup>51</sup> The general thrust of this reference aptly demonstrates the manner in which the magazine framed its model of political involvement during the late Cold War. Regular assertions that the mainstream media was not independently or accurately reporting American involvement in Latin America foregrounded *The Nation's* attempts to position itself at the cutting edge of critical discussions of U.S. interventionism. This consistent self-thematisation of the role of the press indicates that if the magazine did indeed think of itself as the equivalent of a political party, it was one that invested a great deal of faith in the progressive political potential of an autonomous press culture.

## II.

In March 1982, a *Nation* editorial called up the spectre of the Vietnam War to critique U.S. policy in Central America, arguing, "Reagan has now made it clear that he means to repeat the Vietnam tragedy in our own hemisphere, but not, in Marx's formulation, 'as farce.' It will be an even worse tragedy if Congress lets him act it out."<sup>52</sup> This statement demonstrates another key theme in the magazine's coverage of U.S. intervention in Latin America. Suggesting that the Reagan Administration's

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<sup>51</sup> Navasky, *A Matter of Opinion* p. 187.

<sup>52</sup> "Declaring Secret War" in *The Nation* (March 6, 1982) p. 257.

entanglements in the region should be directly compared to previous American involvement in Vietnam, the editorial argued that ultimate responsibility for the prevention of a similar “tragedy” lay with Congress. This faith in the power of American democratic institutions to fulfil their constitutionally apportioned duties highlights a major deviation between the magazine’s anti-interventionism and that of the New Left. Whilst it can be argued that the 1960s movement espoused a form of “radical liberalism” at the core of its political philosophy,<sup>53</sup> it remained fundamentally wary of already existing political institutions, instead preferring arguments for the instigation of “direct” or “participatory” democracy.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence, *The Nation*’s conviction that liberal democratic institutions were, in essence, forces for good, highlights a key dividing line between the magazine’s own brand of late Cold War anti-interventionism and certain of the more radical alternatives to it that grew out of the organisational failure of the New Left.

The question of democratic solutions to Latin American problems first became apparent in the case of Chile. Reviewing Régis Debray’s *Conversations with Allende* (1971) in the April 10, 1972 edition of the magazine, Peter Moscoso-Gongora negatively assessed the French intellectual’s evaluation of Allende’s electoral route to power. He suggested that the Popular Unity coalition’s rejection of Guevarist strategy was what ultimately “so frightened Debray”, and concluded with a question: “can Marxism today win its case legally – against enemies willing to combat it illegally?”

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<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the intellectual-historical pen portraits of certain inspirational movement figures in Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action: The Origins of the New Left and Radical Liberalism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).

<sup>54</sup> For probably the most important articulation of such a discourse in the American context, see “The Port Huron Statement” (1962) in Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (eds.) *“Takin’ it to the Streets”: A Sixties Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp.67-68.

To this, Moscoso-Gongora was willing to provide a cautiously affirmative answer.<sup>55</sup> Only a month after this prediction had been proved mistaken by the Pinochet junta's violent 1973 coup, *The Nation* published UCLA academic E. Bradford Burns's assessment of Allende's time in office. Burns proposed that "Chilean reforms and democracy" had fallen victim to "the middle class's frantic desire to regain power at any price."<sup>56</sup> The article went on to stress its author's belief that Allende's electoral popularity was based on his extension of political participation as well as his land reform policies, and that in contrast, the junta had done nothing that could be said to be "in the name of democracy".<sup>57</sup> Even in the face of such a drastically altered political vista, Burns's line was remarkably similar to that of Moscoso-Gongora, as indicated by his assertion that the September 11 uprising stood as:

The most significant event to occur in Latin America since Fidel Castro entered Havana in 1959...The question at stake (in Allende's Chile) was whether reform could bring about the necessary changes to solve Latin America's problems...Henceforth, all those who advocate reform as the means of change will find their arguments weakened, if not untenable.<sup>58</sup>

Such a conclusion assumed that there was no hope for change in the region if it could not come about through the institutions of liberal democracy.

The role envisaged by the magazine for U.S. institutions themselves was foregrounded after the assassination of Orlando Letelier. A trained economist, Letelier served first as Chilean ambassador to the U.S. and then minister of foreign

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<sup>55</sup> Peter Moscoso-Gongora, "Chile – Reform Without Class War?" in *The Nation* (April 10, 1972) p. 476.

<sup>56</sup> E. Bradford Burns, "Reform Gunned Down: True Verdict on Allende" in *The Nation* (October 29, 1973) p. 422.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p. 424

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 426.

affairs under Allende. After the events of 1973 he became a prominent critic of the Pinochet regime, publishing a condemnation of the effects of free market economics in Chile only weeks before his death.<sup>59</sup> On September 21, 1976, Letelier and his assistant Ronni Moffitt were killed in Washington, D.C. by a car bomb planted by agents of DINA, the Chilean secret police, who were almost certainly aided by a group of former CIA operatives.<sup>60</sup> *The Nation's* editors reacted by condemning the assassination in the strongest terms.<sup>61</sup> Then, on October 9 they published the first of a number of investigative pieces concerning Letelier's murder. Authored by Peter Winn, "Motives for Murder" argued that the killings were "the logical outcome of Kissinger's Chilean policy," before going on to characterise Letelier as "a 'Western European' socialist, who believed in the democratic road to socialism," a "political moderate," and a key figure in attempts to build "a broad front of the Centre left" in Chile.<sup>62</sup> The piece concluded with a number of practical suggestions that spoke directly to the domestic political climate less than a month before the 1976 presidential election. Winn recommended that the left should a) demand a full Congressional investigation into the killings, b) insist on an end to all economic and political aid to the Pinochet regime, and c) campaign to encourage the American electorate to "reject a foreign policy which destabilises democratic governments led by humane reformers and supports totalitarian dictatorships that terrorise and

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<sup>59</sup> Orlando Letelier, "The 'Chicago Boys' in Chile: Economic Freedom's Awful Toll" in *The Nation* (August 28, 1976) pp. 137-142.

<sup>60</sup> The most detailed account of the Letelier-Moffitt killing can found in John Dinges and Saul Landau, *Assassination on Embassy Row* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

<sup>61</sup> For the editorial condemning Letelier's killing, see "Orlando Letelier: Dead by Whose Hand?" in *The Nation* (October 2, 1976) pp. 290-291.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Winn, "Motives for Murder: Why Letelier Died Now" in *The Nation* (October 9, 1976) p. 326.

impoverish their populations.”<sup>63</sup> Only through electoral politics, *The Nation* argued, could such a change be instituted.<sup>64</sup>

Winn’s article was followed in March 1977 by another investigative piece, this time by Saul Landau and Ralph Stevens, who had worked with Letelier at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. They argued that Pinochet had ordered the killing not only to silence Letelier, but also as a symbolic attack on the lack of U.S. support for his regime.<sup>65</sup> They went on to reveal information tying aspects of the planning and preparation of the assassination to former CIA agents and members of the Cuban exile community in Florida, before demanding that those involved, whether Chilean, Cuban or American, be held to account.<sup>66</sup> Finally, in June of the same year, after it had come to light that the CIA was attempting to cover up the facts of the case, an editorial concluded, “there is only one official of our government who can stop this obstruction – the President of the United States.”<sup>67</sup>

Why was the Letelier case given such significant coverage in *The Nation*? The killing was undoubtedly a shocking example of the repressive tendencies of the Pinochet regime, one that hit particularly close to home because the magazine itself had printed one of Letelier’s dissenting accounts of Chilean politics only weeks before his death. However, it is necessary to go beyond this explanation in order to draw out the underlying significance of the incident for *The Nation*’s conception of anti-interventionist politics. First, it allowed the magazine to present Letelier as a martyred democratic socialist who, until his death, was a symbol of hope for liberal,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 328.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 328.

<sup>65</sup> Saul Landau and Ralph Stevens, “The Letelier/Moffitt Murder: This is how it was done” in *The Nation* (March 26, 1977) p. 359.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. p. 360.

<sup>67</sup> “The CIA’s Apprentices” in *The Nation* (June 25, 1977) p. 772.

electoral change in Chile. This was the type of anti-interventionist figure that the magazine favoured, standing as he did as a counter-example to the growing guerrilla movements of Central America. Second, it was possible to portray the domestic investigation into the killing as an essentially constitutional drama. Before the 1976 election, the case was used to highlight the apparent power of the voters to replace those at the top of the foreign policy-making elite. After the polls, congressional inquiries were demanded, and ultimate responsibility for holding the killers to account was placed at the feet of newly elected Democratic President Jimmy Carter. Whilst certain questions *were* raised about the underlying structural relations between the American and Chilean ruling elites, these were side-lined in order to make way for issues that could be approached through a legalistic framework. At all points, then, it was assumed that the institutions of liberal democracy would be more than capable of providing solutions to the problems afflicting the political systems of both the U.S. and Chile.

In the case of Nicaragua, *The Nation's* coverage of the constitutional implications of American intervention varied quite considerably in the years between the revolution and the Iran-Contra scandal. The changes in tone and focus that took place depended primarily on the balance of power in Washington between the Democratic and Republican parties, and also between the executive branch and the legislature. However, at all times the magazine took a line that was at least cautiously optimistic regarding the capabilities of constitutional government. In September 1978, after mounting tension between the Somoza regime and the opposition had led the Carter Administration to block an International Monetary Fund loan destined for Managua, an editorial posed the question, "What can and should the U.S. do about the

situation in Nicaragua?”<sup>68</sup> A preference was stated for the replacement of Somoza by a “middle-class regime willing to try a bit of democracy” rather than a “leftist or even ‘Castroite’ setup”, before the endorsement of a “positive hands-off” approach, in which the U.S. would withdraw all support for Somoza as the preface for leaving the Nicaraguan people to establish their own democratic alternative to oligarchic rule.<sup>69</sup> This line essentially served to hold Carter’s “human rights-based” foreign policy to account, after the President had pursued the “contradictory” approach of congratulating Somoza for his human rights record only months before withdrawing funding for the regime.<sup>70</sup>

Cynthia Arnson reinforced this line in a June 1979 article, in which she analysed the efforts of a bipartisan group of pro-Somoza Congressmen and their effect on Carter’s Nicaragua policy. Her piece suggested that “whatever the truth of (the Congressmen’s) cries of alarm, they have served to excuse the Carter Administration from taking stronger action against Somoza.”<sup>71</sup> By removing all U.S. support for the oligarchy, Arnson argued, “Carter could resuscitate his now tarnished human rights policy and give Nicaraguans the rightful chance to direct their own future.”<sup>72</sup> Whilst the 1978 editorial seemed to be suggesting that Carter’s approach was essentially correct, and simply needed implementing more consistently, Arnson’s article described the battle over American involvement in Nicaragua as that between Congress and the Presidency. In both, as in *The Nation*’s reaction to the Letelier murder, the problem was characterised as a constitutional drama, in which a

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<sup>68</sup> “Sandino, Somoza and Carter” in *The Nation* (September 9, 1978) p. 194.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 195.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p. 195.

<sup>71</sup> Cynthia Arnson, “Charge up Capitol Hill: Saving Somoza” in *The Nation* (June 23, 1979) p. 756.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p. 756.

principled approach from the Carter Administration could result in the development of a more democratic Nicaragua.

Once the revolution had concluded, the magazine took an ambivalent stance towards what it saw as the superficially democratic intentions of the Sandinistas.<sup>73</sup> However, after the 1980 election and the installation of Ronald Reagan in the White House, it tempered that ambivalence in order to stand squarely in opposition to the President's interventionist policies in Nicaragua. In May 1983, an editorial discussed the passage of the Boland Amendment, which prohibited the U.S. government from providing funding for the Contras to explicitly overthrow the Sandinista government, whilst allowing all other support. It argued that in the context of the amendment and the continued debates on Capitol Hill over the funding of counterrevolution, "the future of the Nicaraguan revolution may be determined most of all by the actions of the U.S. Congress."<sup>74</sup> The piece highlighted legislation proposed by Georgia Representative Wyche Fowler Jr., which favoured restraint on *all* covert action in Nicaragua and stood as an attempt to tighten the Boland Amendment's most obvious loophole. In answer to Ronald Reagan's earlier assertion that the Contras were "freedom fighters" and the ideological equivalents of America's "founding fathers", the editorial suggested that members who voted for Fowler's legislation "would have a right to call themselves freedom fighters – against the Contra in the White House."<sup>75</sup> In this way, the roles sketched out for the legislative and executive branches during the Carter Administration were effectively reversed.

This characterisation continued in editorials and articles throughout the next three years, all of which sought to redress Reagan's covert action in Nicaragua

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<sup>73</sup> See, for example, "Somozan Sunset" in *The Nation* (July 14-21, 1979) p. 36.

<sup>74</sup> "Contra Reagan" in *The Nation* (May 21, 1983) p. 625.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 625.



through a constitutional framework. In November 1984, an editorial argued that it was “the cowardice of Congress in the face of executive aggression” that put Nicaraguan democracy in peril, and that if the legislative branch could stop Reagan in Central America, he could be stopped everywhere.<sup>76</sup> The following year, an article by Institute for Policy Studies scholars Robert Borosage and Peter Kornbluh proposed that “Nicaragua now stands not only as a test of a strategy of low-level warfare abroad but as a test of the viability of the ‘big lie’ technique at home. It remains to be seen whether Congress will pass the test.”<sup>77</sup> Finally, in a piece marking the Fourth of July holiday, the magazine’s editors suggested that whilst Congressional action had until that point failed to “deter the strategists of empire from their rambunctious course”, more votes and more debates in the House and Senate were needed in order to return the U.S. “to the promises of its founding philosophy”.<sup>78</sup> Such promises, the reader was led to assume, had been broken by Reagan’s anti-democratic intervention in Nicaragua on behalf of the Contras. Again, then, it is possible to see that however pessimistic the tone of its analysis, *The Nation* maintained its faith in Congress to limit the unconstitutional actions of the Presidency.

This approach, whether taken towards American intervention in Chile or Nicaragua, meant that in the face of executive failure to live up to expectations (i.e. Carter in Chile and Nicaragua), or legislative inability to restrain an overtly interventionist executive (i.e. Reagan in Nicaragua), *The Nation* maintained a clear faith in the idea that already-existing democratic institutions could provide solutions to crises relating to foreign policy. It is in this overarching theme that the central

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<sup>76</sup> “Nicaragua Baiting” in *The Nation* (November 24, 1984) p. 540.

<sup>77</sup> Robert Borosage and Peter Kornbluh, “The Smear Nicaragua Campaign: Behind Reagan’s Propaganda Blitz” in *The Nation* (April 13, 1985) p. 426.

<sup>78</sup> “Imperial Weekend” in *The Nation* (July 5/12, 1986) p. 1.

paradox of liberal anti-interventionism began to materialise, and a key question became unavoidable: would the institutions of liberal democracy *ever* be able to restrain the interventionism that appeared to be an inherent dynamic within the U.S. foreign policy-making system?

### III.

Such a question became even more pressing during the Iran-Contra affair.<sup>79</sup> On November 3, 1986, Lebanese newspaper *Al-Shiraa* reported that former National Security Advisor Robert MacFarlane had made a secret visit to Iran earlier that year in order to discuss the sale of weapons to the Islamic Republic in return for the release of American hostages in Lebanon. On November 13, Ronald Reagan denied the claims in a televised address to the nation, but by this point the issue was beyond the President's control. It soon became apparent not only that weapons had been sold to Iran in contravention of official U.S. policy, but also that the profits gained from these deals had been channelled to fund a program of military assistance to the Nicaraguan Contras that had been in existence since 1984, in spite of Congressional prohibition of such funding. Months of investigative work on the part of lawyers and journalists sought to establish who knew what about the scheme, and when. That process culminated in the high-profile Iran-Contra Congressional hearings that took place between 5 May and 15 August 1987, and were broadcast on public television.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> What I call Iran-Contra has been given number of different names in the period since the controversy became public knowledge. Gippergate, Irangate, Contragate, Iranagua, Iran/Contra: these are only some of the many designations given to the crisis. I use Iran-Contra because it is the simplest, most recognisable and most elegant of the epithets. However, I have not changed any of the references to the affair under different names in the words of others.

<sup>80</sup> A moderately sized literature has developed covering the Iran-Contra affair. The details above are generally well documented, but are in this case taken from what is probably the most complete account of the scandal: Theodore Draper, *A Very Thin Line: The Iran-Contra Affair* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1991). Other notable studies include then *Economist* journalist Ann Wroe's description of the

*The Nation*, much like every other American news outlet, provided lengthy, in-depth coverage of the affair in editorials, opinion pieces and articles. Indeed, in the period between November 1986 and July 1990, a total of forty-four items were published on the topic, making Iran-Contra easily the period's most covered story. After brief mentions in earlier editions, the topic was confronted head-on in a uniquely formatted front-page editorial dated December 13, 1986 (Figure 4). In that piece, the magazine laid out its initial interpretation of the scandal:

At its core the crisis that has already diverted and may permanently derail the Reagan Administration concerns the conduct of foreign policy and the democratic legitimacy of presidential authority; until those issues are met, the crisis cannot be resolved honestly...No other President has until now so vastly replaced open policies with covert ones, or so cynically removed the major issues...from the possibility of public debate.<sup>81</sup>

Whilst this rhetoric essentially expanded the legalistic analysis of American foreign policy demonstrated in the magazine's earlier analysis of U.S. involvement in Chile and Nicaragua, the editorial also proposed that Reagan's foreign policy-making style was in some way *exceptional*.

This suggestion was to be a continuing theme throughout the magazine's coverage of the affair, and it became apparent again in an editorial discussing William Casey, a member of the Reagan Administration who had been intimately involved in the scandal. After his death from cancer in May 1987, the former Director of Central

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events of the cover up, the report of independent public prosecutor, Lawrence E. Walsh, and Michael Lynch and David Bogen's examination of the "social construction" of history during the Congressional hearings. See Ann Wroe, *Lives, Lies and the Iran-Contra Affair* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991); Lawrence E. Walsh, *Iran-Contra: The Final Report* (New York: Random House, 1994); Michael Lynch and David Bogen, *The Spectacle of History: Speech, Text and Memory at the Iran-Contra Hearings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

<sup>81</sup> "Secret Wars: The Core of the Crisis" in *The Nation* (December 13, 1986) p. 657-659.

Intelligence became one of a number of scapegoats for those seeking to protect the President. *The Nation*'s editors suggested that whilst he was by no means innocent, Reagan should not be allowed to blame Casey so easily. Indeed, they attempted to demonstrate that the events of Iran-Contra provided grounds enough for impeachment, arguing:

It does not matter whether our forgetful President knew every overt or covert act of the conspirators; his participation even as far as it has been disclosed should be enough to prompt the House to instruct its Judiciary Committee to open an investigation.<sup>82</sup>

Once more, then, it was implied that Reagan himself, either implicitly or explicitly, had created the covert operations of which the scandal consisted, and that the problems they caused could be solved by constitutional means.

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<sup>82</sup> "The Dead and the Naked" in *The Nation* (May 16, 1987) p. 631.

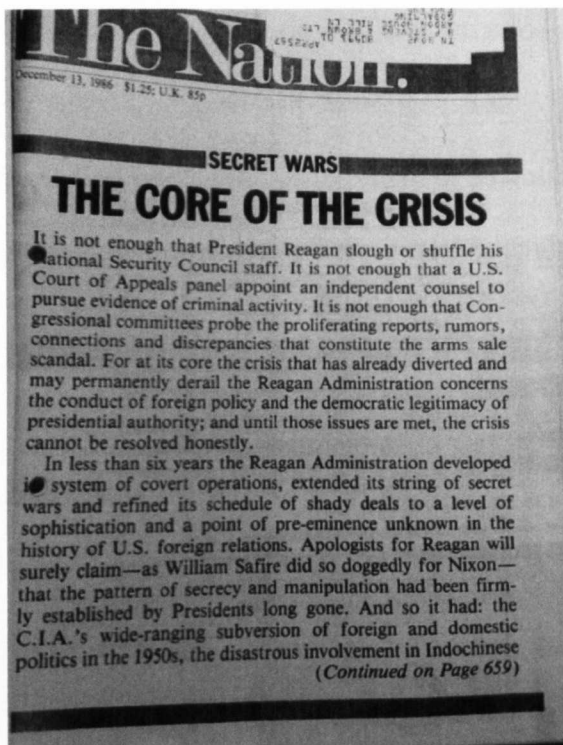


Figure 4. Full-page editorial discussing the Iran-Contra scandal. *The Nation* (December 13, 1986)  
p. 657.

The scandal took on a new dimension with the rise to prominence of Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North. A decorated Vietnam veteran, in the early years of the Reagan Administration North became a signal member of the President's National Security Council, helping to facilitate the arms deals with Iran and mastermind the diversion of profits to the Contras. As soon as the scandal became public, he was removed from office, but his centrality to the events of Iran-Contra could not be ignored. On June 27 1987, little more than a week before North was due to testify in front of Congress, *The Nation* published an article by Peter Kornbluh entitled "Ollie's Follies," which sought to expose the nefarious and unconstitutional plans North had concocted during his time in office. It argued that after the passage of the Boland

Amendment, North had taken on the unofficial role of “commander in chief of Contra military strategy,”<sup>83</sup> with the ultimate goal of gaining recognition for the rebel group as a “government in exile.”<sup>84</sup> The piece went on to criticise North’s portrayal in the mainstream media as a mentally unstable loose cannon, arguing that his plots and proposals flourished in the culture of a “covert kingdom” within Reagan’s executive branch that actively encouraged such thinking.<sup>85</sup>

When North appeared before the Congressional hearings between July 7 and 14 1987, he managed to garner enormous public support, leading Jefferson Morely to describe him as “the latest in a string of pop-culture icons representing the legacy of the Vietnam War in American life.”<sup>86</sup> Linking North’s popularity to that of the Reagan era’s numerous “hard-body” action films,<sup>87</sup> Morely argued that the former Lieutenant Colonel was a “hit” because he presented himself as a “kind of militant...idealist, a tender-hearted soldier, an apostle of ‘freedom’, the man who was going to do good no matter what.”<sup>88</sup> Such an argument led the piece to conclude that public support for North did not *necessarily* equate to support for Reagan, a dubious conclusion, at best. But taken in combination with Peter Kornbluh’s article, Morely’s piece demonstrates a consistent conceptualisation within the pages of *The Nation* of North as an archetypal Reagan-era Cold Warrior. Such portrayals implicitly posited Iran-Contra as an anomalous event of a type unique to the Presidential administration

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<sup>83</sup> Peter Kornbluh, “Ollie’s Follies: What North Might Have Wrought” in *The Nation* (June 27, 1987) p. 871.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 888.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 889.

<sup>86</sup> Jefferson Morely, “Perils of “Good Intentions”: The Paradox of North’s Popularity” in *The Nation* (August 15/22, 1987) p. 122.

<sup>87</sup> The films of the *Rambo* trilogy (1982-1988) were the “hard body” genre’s most obvious exemplars, with their central protagonist (Sylvester Stallone’s John Rambo), as Susan Jeffords has suggested, standing as an “emblem” for Reagan’s foreign policy. See Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994) p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> Morely, “Perils of ‘Good Intentions’” p. 124.

under which it took place, thereby separating the scandal from the logic of the Cold War itself.

Indeed, this interpretation continued even after George Bush entered the White House. Bush, who had been Reagan's Vice President, did not emerge from the scandal with an untarnished reputation, a fact that was highlighted in a 1989 *Nation* editorial. Focussing on the broader implications of Iran-Contra, the editorial suggested that the extent to which Reagan, Bush and others in the Administration had "manipulated foreign relations worldwide in order to keep the Contras armed" was "the most important remaining issue of the scandal."<sup>89</sup> As with Reagan, the issue of impeachment was raised, with the editorial arguing,

Bush has the best impeachment insurance available, but even if Dan Quayle were replaced tomorrow by Abraham Lincoln, the Democrats would not consider an investigation even to *determine* if grounds for impeachment exist...What's missing is any strong desire to act as custodians of the Constitution. And that, after all, is what made it so easy for the Reagan-Bush team to make a mockery of the law.<sup>90</sup>

Again, echoes existed in such editorialising of the legalistic analysis highlighted in section II, with Iran-Contra now standing in the place of the Letelier murder or American aid to Nicaragua as an example of constitutional drama. But at the same time, the piece highlighted the way in which much of *The Nation's* liberal analysis represented the scandal as a result of nefarious policy-making in the Reagan-Bush White House, rather than as a symptom of more deep-rooted problems with American foreign policy.

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<sup>89</sup> "The Contratution" in *The Nation* (May 29, 1989) p. 724.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* p. 724.

A more radical critique of Iran-Contra *was* printed in the magazine's pages, but it existed almost entirely in the opinion columns of two of its more controversial contributors: Alexander Cockburn and Christopher Hitchens. During the scandal, Cockburn continued the sardonic criticism of mainstream media practices previously outlined, at the same time arguing that Iran-Contra was but one example of a larger phenomenon of covert operations that had been taking place throughout the Cold War. "What we have here is not 'Irangate' or 'Iranagua' or 'Gippergate,'" he argued in January 1987,

but something very appropriate to this age of sequels: Watergate II, a logical extension of Watergate I, since at its heart it concerns secret government, criminality, and an attempt to circumvent democratic checks, such as laws passed by Congress and national elections.<sup>91</sup>

Later in the year, Cockburn suggested that there existed "a powerful urge in Congress and in the press to see the scandal in procedural rather than substantive terms," a trend that was "reminiscent of Watergate."<sup>92</sup> Such a focus meant that although there was "a certain measure of vigorous coverage" of Iran-Contra, the mainstream media's inability to draw links between the affair and previous examples of executive branch corruption meant that it would always be discussed in the liberal idiom of "soap opera précis."<sup>93</sup>

Cockburn extended this assessment in April 1987, when he took aim at the widely held assumption that during the affair Reagan had been the unwitting victim of a policy-making takeover by the NSC and CIA. The popularity of such a discourse, he

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<sup>91</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil" in *The Nation* (January 10, 1987) p. 7.

<sup>92</sup> Alexander Cockburn, "Beat the Devil" in *The Nation* (March 7, 1987) p. 279.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 279.



suggested, was evidence of “the official press’s determination...to fulfil its fundamental role of providing reassurance rather than news.”<sup>94</sup> Turning his attention specifically to an article written by James LeMoyne, he accused the *New York Times* and one-time *Nation* journalist of being blind to the similarities between U.S. funding for the Contras and previous Cold War counterinsurgency campaigns in Vietnam, Malaya and the Philippines. Such a blinkered analysis, Cockburn suggested, placed LeMoyne and the *Times* on the “political-philosophical plane of Reagan, Casey and North.”<sup>95</sup> By using Iran-Contra to highlight the continuities between the actions of the Reagan Administration and previous examples of American imperialism in the Third World, Cockburn pursued a significantly more radical analysis of the affair than many of the other journalists writing for *The Nation*. His intervention was an attempt to increase the profile of a far-reaching critique of U.S. imperialism that he did not believe had gained enough attention in the American public sphere. This process demonstrated the ways in which Cockburn’s particular brand of anti-interventionism was perhaps more suited to the institutional framework of Verso’s radical *Haymarket Series* – which had in 1987 published a collection of his “Beat the Devil” columns – than to that of *The Nation*.<sup>96</sup>

The magazine’s second prominent radical voice during the affair was that of Christopher Hitchens. Like Cockburn, Hitchens was a British expatriate to the United States. Born in England in 1949, he was educated at Oxford University between 1967 and 1970, when he became involved student politics via the British Trotskyist movement. Hitchens then forged a career as a literary and political journalist in

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<sup>94</sup> Alexander Cockburn, “Beat the Devil” in *The Nation* (April 4, 1987) p. 422.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* p. 423.

<sup>96</sup> See Alexander Cockburn. *Corruptions of Empire: Life Studies and the Reagan Era* (London: Verso, 1987). *The Haymarket Series*, along with its companion “socialist yearbook”, *The Year Left*, form the subjects of Chapter 2 of this thesis.

London during the 1970s, running in the same circles as Martin Amis, James Fenton and Ian McEwan, before moving to New York in 1981 at the invitation of Victor Navasky. In 1982, Hitchens moved permanently to Washington, D.C. in order to become *The Nation*'s reporter from the city, and his fortnightly column, entitled "Minority Report," was published in alternate issues to Cockburn's "Beat the Devil", and generally discussed "beltway" issues.<sup>97</sup> This alternate remit, which led him to focus more closely than his colleague on domestic politics and Washington intrigue, meant that the column rarely touched on issues of U.S. involvement in Latin America until the emergence of the Iran-Contra affair.

Like Cockburn, Hitchens's first instinct was to highlight the continuities between the affair and its numerous Cold War predecessors. Surveying the Washington scene in the aftermath of the scandal's first month of media coverage, he perceived that the right was preparing its own version of events, one that had been "road-tested in the stab-in-the-back dramas of China, Cuba and Vietnam." This version, Hitchens argued, would conclude with accusations that the liberal establishment had tied the hands of certain "gallant men", thus preventing them from doing their patriotic duty.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, after Oliver North's televised testimony to the Congressional hearings, Hitchens characterised the former N.S.C. staffer as a affiliate of the "American *Freikorps*," a group he claimed had been established in the wake of defeat in Vietnam to draw up contingency plans to "suspend the constitution

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<sup>97</sup> For a range of entertaining autobiographical details published little more than a year before his death, see Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010), especially pp. 204-238, which contain a discussion of the author's experiences in the U.S.

<sup>98</sup> Christopher Hitchens, "Minority Report" in *The Nation* (December 13, 1986) p. 662.

and impose martial law” in the event of mass opposition to a U.S. military operation overseas.<sup>99</sup>

These characterisations of Iran-Contra combined radical, convention-distorting analysis with essentially fantastical rhetoric. They culminated in Hitchens’s October 1987 assertion that, in opposition to the timeline provided by most accounts, the affair actually had its origins in Republican Party machinations during the 1980 Presidential campaign. Much of incumbent President Jimmy Carter’s unpopularity that year stemmed from his inability to resolve the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, in which fifty-three Americans were held for over a year by a group of militant students who had captured the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Based on testimony to the Iran-Contra hearings from CIA operative Duane Clarridge, Hitchens alleged that there had been a pledge from Ronald Reagan’s campaign directors that they would supply arms to Tehran if Carter were denied the triumphant return of hostages in the days before the 1980 poll.<sup>100</sup> This attempt to avoid an “October Surprise” meant that 1981 was “the year that mattered” in establishing the origins of the affair, because it was then that the first shipment of arms had been sent to Iran.<sup>101</sup>

On the whole, such a forthright approach to the scandal was contained within the columns of *The Nation*’s two iconoclastic British radicals. On a few occasions, however, such critique was allowed to slip to the back of the magazine and inhabit the book review section. Two notable examples of this trend came at the height of the scandal, during the summer of 1987. Reviewing a book entitled *The Iran-Contra Connection*, former *Ramparts* editor Larry Bensky suggested that it should be read by those who wanted to explore certain issues not covered by the “tepid” Congressional

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<sup>99</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Minority Report” in *The Nation* (August 1/8, 1987) p. 80.

<sup>100</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Minority Report” in *The Nation* (October 24, 1987) p. 440.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 440.

hearings. He went on to argue that the book's authors, along with all of those analysts who were able to see the "big picture" and link Reagan's secret war against Nicaragua to previous examples of U.S. counterrevolution in the Third World were all too often "treated like viewers of the Loch Ness monster: they are dismissed from the 'legitimate' news media", and "relegated" to writing books for small alternative presses.<sup>102</sup> Given the limitations of space provided by his book review essay, Bensky was unable to expand on these insights, but whether wittingly or not, they stood as a critique of *The Nation's* coverage of the scandal, as well as that of the mainstream press.

Perry Anderson provided a further example in June 1987. Reviewing a collection of documents pertaining to the "Central American crisis" edited by Robert Leiken and Barry Rubin, Anderson, another luminary of the British New Left, aimed his first critical salvo at historian Walter LaFeber, who had provided a quotation for the text's dust jacket. "It is astonishing that LaFeber, author of an eminently honourable oeuvre on the American Empire," he wrote, "should not have realised he was stumbling into the intellectual perimeter of the universe of...Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North."<sup>103</sup> The collection itself, Anderson averred, cast its heroes, Arturo Cruz (a Contra leader), Napoleon Duarte (former Christian Democratic President of El Salvador and sometime ally of that country's far right death squads) and Jeane Kirkpatrick (a leading neoconservative intellectual and Reagan's ambassador to the United Nations), in a drama entitled "the Tragedy of the Nicaraguan Revolution."<sup>104</sup> As a consequence, Leiken and Rubin's book highlighted the apparently pernicious and anti-democratic intentions of the Sandinistas without giving their revolution a full

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<sup>102</sup> Larry Bensky, "Backroom Boys" in *The Nation* (August 29, 1987) p. 172.

<sup>103</sup> Perry Anderson, "Contraband" in *The Nation* (June 20, 1987) p. 855.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 855-856.

or fair hearing, and therefore stood as “a reminder to us all that Contragate is not the end of the mentality that created it.”<sup>105</sup>

The examples provided by Bensky and Anderson’s book reviews, along with the columns of Alexander Cockburn and Christopher Hitchens, show that a certain measure of radical discourse *was* allowed to coexist with more liberal strains of anti-interventionism in *The Nation*. However, there were a number of concrete limits placed on the effective operation of such discourse. Cockburn’s “Beat the Devil” column was usually restricted to two pages, and Hitchens’s “Minority Report” to just one. Similarly, book reviews were, on the whole, given between half a page and two pages in which to expound their theses. This meant that, with limited access to the rest of the magazine, very little space was available to the authors of radical analysis to develop their arguments. Furthermore, during the Iran-Contra scandal *The Nation*’s editorial section, which provided the structuring discourse around which each issue operated and arguably formed the magazine’s most important intervention into contemporary political debate, was bereft of radical critique of U.S. foreign policy. Added to this is the fact that three of the four authors examined above were British (Cockburn, Hitchens and Anderson). The fact of their nationality inevitably risked their characterisation as eccentric relatives of the American left, to be tolerated but not taken seriously. Cumulatively, these factors meant that the key proponents of radical anti-interventionism in *The Nation* operated in an essentially circumscribed arena, in which their critique of Iran-Contra was pushed to the margins of an institution intent on privileging the discourses of a distinctly liberal strain of opposition to U.S. policy in Latin America.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p. 857.

Such a limitation might not have mattered had the magazine been capable of resolving the inherent contradictions of its reliance on a mode of analysis that put ultimate faith in the power of constitutional government. Indeed, on a number of occasions, articles covering the Iran-Contra scandal came close to complicating or even repudiating the notion that Congress could effectively limit the power of the Reagan Administration. Discussing the impending appearance of John Poindexter before the Iran-Contra hearings, for example, an editorial noted that the former National Security Advisor would face a Congress “not conspicuous for examining his, or its own assumptions about America and the world.”<sup>106</sup> Later in 1987, this time discussing the testimony of Elliott Abrams, Reagan’s Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, another editorial argued that his treatment indicated that neither Congress nor the mainstream media were capable of raising “even a smidgen of outrage or protest against an executive branch that feels free to betray the legislature.”<sup>107</sup> Such criticism of the Congressional hearings continued a week later in an article by David Corn, the magazine’s Washington correspondent. The piece suggested that the hearings represented “a Democratic surrender of the political issues generated by the hearings.” It went on to argue that the committees were dominated by a bipartisan effort to use the proceedings as a “pro-Contra forum,” in which the underlying tenets of Reagan’s policy of funding the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries were never questioned.<sup>108</sup> After the publication of the final Iran-Contra report, Corn produced another commentary, in which he suggested that whilst there was some cause for cheer (Reagan had, after all, been blamed for the wrongdoing and appeared to be a lame duck), the hearings were a failure because “by

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<sup>106</sup> “Beyond Poindexter” in *The Nation* (May 2, 1987) p. 560.

<sup>107</sup> “Lying in State” in *The Nation* (June 20, 1987) p. 836.

<sup>108</sup> David Corn, “The Story So Far” in *The Nation* (June 27, 1987) p. 875.

ignoring Congress's own complicity and fundamental issues of foreign policy and executive power, the committees have done little to prevent future abuses like those they have fitfully uncovered."<sup>109</sup>

These discursive fragments amounted to the most pressing critique of Congressional action in the realm of diplomacy that *The Nation* was able to summon during the late Cold War. On the surface, it may have seemed that the magazine was suggesting that Iran-Contra indicated the inherent assumptions and corruption of U.S. foreign policy-making were essentially *systemic*. But such a conclusion is belied by the prominent place given in 1989 to an analysis of the scandal by University of California academic Paul Savoy. He argued that although "every conceivable civic lesson" had been drawn from the affair, the *most important* issue had not been covered: "the extent to which the conduct of a covert operation in support of the Contras constituted a conspiracy to exterminate human life."<sup>110</sup> Rather than focussing on what Ronald Reagan did or did not know about the arms sales to Iran and subsequent diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, the Congressional investigation should have aimed to highlight "deeper systemic flaws" in the legal structure of American diplomacy.<sup>111</sup>

Up until this point in his article, Savoy had not deviated from, or added to, the analytic stance outlined in the articles examined above. However, it was in its *prescriptive* section that the piece proved its significance for an illustration of *The Nation's* liberal approach to anti-interventionism. In that section, Savoy suggested that a *constitutional amendment* was needed to correct "the use of armed force as an

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<sup>109</sup> David Corn, "Report Card" in *The Nation* (December 5, 1987) p. 669.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Savoy, "U.S. vs. Oliver North: Deregulating Political Murder" in *The Nation* (June 26, 1989) p. 886.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 887.

instrument of foreign policy.” The institution of such an amendment would lead to “a framework within which war and the preparation for war can be brought under moral and legal scrutiny by individuals acting as civilian peacekeepers.”<sup>112</sup> Such a suggestion would have echoed the New Left’s desire to apply the strictures of direct democracy to the foreign policy-making process if Savoy had not implied that his “civilian peacekeepers” would reside within already existing institutions such as Congress and the Supreme Court. Overall, then, what such an analysis offered was a procedural approach to what were admitted to be inherently systemic problems. It highlighted the fact that whilst its analysis of the Iran-Contra affair proved *The Nation* capable of identifying the underlying influence of Cold War ideology in the formation and ineffective oversight of U.S. foreign policy, the magazine was incapable of mobilising what would have amounted to an epistemological break with its underlying liberal assumptions about the American political system.

#### IV.

The detailed examination given in this chapter to *The Nation*’s coverage of U.S. relations with Chile and Nicaragua, as well as of the Iran-Contra affair, has been necessary in order to demonstrate the important point that political periodicals can be read in a variety of ways, and that markedly dissimilar conclusions can be reached by individual readers. For example, a weekly perusal of columns by Alexander Cockburn and Christopher Hitchens would have resulted in a manifestly different view of issues regarding U.S. policy towards Latin America than an examination of the magazine’s unsigned editorials and longer articles on related topics. But the obvious political

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p. 887.



tensions highlighted in this example do not amount to what Victor Navasky has described as a “conversation” between radical and liberal discursive currents. Instead, it has been shown that within the pages of *The Nation* a form of liberal anti-interventionism remained essentially dominant, paying editorial lip service to radical critique, but rarely giving it an equivalent forum. This meant that at the same time as the magazine criticised the practices of various mainstream media outlets, it also maintained a faith in the power of “mainstream” political opposition to U.S. foreign policy.

Whilst it targeted readers within the Central America solidarity movement, and, indeed, was read by a wide range of activists, *The Nation* seldom mentioned organisations such as CISPES and NicaNet, relying instead on coverage and criticism of the upper echelons of the foreign policy-making process. The magazine consequently eschewed the comparatively more radical stance of expressing open solidarity with the Nicaraguan revolution, avoided any efforts to directly engage grass roots resistance to Reagan’s policies in Central America, and chose instead to emphasise its role as a provider of news and opinion to left-wing communities. In doing so, the magazine highlighted one method of engagement between the press and the anti-interventionist movement, a method appropriate to one of the largest circulating left-wing periodicals in the U.S. However, the subject of the next chapter, the *Guardian*, approached a similar set of issues in an altogether different manner, thereby articulating a contrasting role for the alternative press in the formation of opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, and once again demonstrating the variety and complexity of 1980s anti-interventionist thought and culture.

## Chapter 4

### The Guardian, the Solidarity Movement and El Salvador

In December 1987, an advertisement for weekly New York-based radical newspaper the *Guardian* appeared in the official magazine of Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES). Its headline read “GUARDIAN – ACTIVIST TOOL”, and it was accompanied by a quotation from Vivian Stromberg, then a director of the women’s human rights and Central America solidarity group, MADRE:

The *Guardian* makes it hard for Reagan and his cohort to do their dirt behind our backs – and, at the same time, it connects all of us, sisters and brothers in the U.S. and around the world, in our various struggles for creative, positive, social and political change.<sup>1</sup>

This advertisement sheds light on the key relationship that developed between the *Guardian* and the Central America solidarity movement during the 1980s. After changing hands in 1967 and shifting both its ownership and readership from the Old to the New Left, the newsweekly embraced a Marxist-Leninist political orientation, and followed a long and tempestuous route through the factional debates of post-1960s U.S. radicalism, several of which will be detailed below. However, by the early 1980s, it had embraced a fundamentally ecumenical approach to left politics. This chapter will demonstrate how and why the paper’s editorial board, as well as many

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<sup>1</sup> *Alert!* (December 1987-January 1988) p. 9.

campaigners within the Central America solidarity movement, came to see the *Guardian* as an “activist tool” that could be used by both individuals and support networks in their struggle against the Reagan Doctrine. While it operated on a different scale to *The Nation* and had distinct political priorities, the paper developed an organic link to the solidarity movement, and therefore provided a no less important forum for debate and mobilisation.

Essentially, the *Guardian*’s coverage of U.S. involvement in Central America, as well as of the domestic solidarity movement, served three specific purposes. First, the paper attempted to play an *organisational* role by using its subscription list to promote the goals of solidarity activists, and to retain the important link between developments in Central American politics, especially El Salvador, and coverage of the movement in the U.S. Second, the paper played an *ideological* role by seeking to publicise important strategic debates that were taking place within the solidarity movement. Finally, the paper’s coverage played an essentially *propagandistic* role, with numerous articles including rousing calls to contribute to a burgeoning movement that had the potential to defeat the Reagan administration. In bringing these three roles together, the *Guardian* demonstrated its function as a cultural forum in which the goals of the Central America solidarity movement could be publicised, thereby bringing them into dialogue with the various other political activities undertaken by the 1980s U.S. left.

## I.

The first issue of the *National Guardian* (the paper’s original title) was published on 18 October 1948. Founded by James Aronson and Cedric Belfrage, who were soon joined on the editorial board by John McManus, the rationale for the newspaper was

drawn from a conviction that, in Belfrage's words, "what was needed above all in post-war America was a publication dedicated not so much to opinion and polemic as to the supplying of truthful news in areas where the truth was especially suppressed or distorted."<sup>2</sup> The immediate opportunity to produce such a paper was provided by Henry A. Wallace's 1948 Progressive Party presidential campaign. Aronson and Belfrage printed a prototype publication, the *National Gazette*, and distributed it so successfully at the party's nominating convention in August of that year that they were convinced a fully-fledged newsweekly would be viable.<sup>3</sup> This party-political link (which was by no means official because the paper took great pride in its financial and editorial independence) was a strategic choice, as Aronson and Belfrage noted later: "with the Progressive Party we decided against commitment to socialism, for we hoped to win a public beyond the "converted", starting where they were and leading them by subversively rational steps to where we were."<sup>4</sup> The paper therefore focussed on two key political objectives. First, it aimed to provide a voice of dissent against the Cold War policies being set in place by the Truman administration, both at home and abroad.<sup>5</sup> Second, the editors aimed to "work for the return of America to the path it followed under F. D. Roosevelt", by arguing that there was a fundamentally progressive core to the New Deal that had been betrayed by the new

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<sup>2</sup> Cedric Belfrage, "A Dissenting Newspaper in the USA" (unpublished essay, 1957) cited in Jennifer Susan Palmer, "Cedric Belfrage: Anglo-American Nonconformist", PhD dissertation, University of Delaware (1993) p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, "Cedric Belfrage" p. 205.

<sup>4</sup> Cedric Belfrage and James Aronson, *Something to Guard: The Stormy Life of the National Guardian, 1948-1967* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Georgakas, "National Guardian/Guardian" in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 529.

president's fostering of a militant anti-communism in the aftermath of the Second World War.<sup>6</sup>

These Old Left political preoccupations led the *National Guardian* to take contentious positions on a number of key debates within the post-war public sphere. Perhaps the most significant issue in the paper's early history was the Korean War. During its first twelve months of publication, circulation reached 75,000, with subscribers coming from a variety of radical, progressive and liberal political backgrounds, enticed by the *National Guardian*'s clear, concise prose style. But Aronson and Belfrage's principled opposition to U.S. intervention in Korea led to a dramatic reduction in subscription levels and funding, as many of the paper's more moderate (and, often, more wealthy) readers were scared away by the climate of red baiting that was rapidly enveloping the U.S. left. Circulation dropped significantly, to approximately 45,000 (a figure that continued to fall throughout the 1950s), and the editors consequently lost hope of building a broad-based, mass readership, instead electing to focus on specific communities of middle-aged, middle-class radicals uncowed by McCarthyism.<sup>7</sup> The paper proceeded to speak out in favour of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg during their trial for espionage in 1951, to support socialist Vito Marcantonio in his bid to become mayor of New York in 1949-1950, to back Fidel Castro in his struggle against the U.S.-backed Batista regime in Cuba, to provide early support for the emerging Civil Rights Movement, and to consistently criticise U.S. policy in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cedric Belfrage, *The Frightened Giant: My Unfinished Affair with America* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957) p. 35, cited in Palmer, "Cedric Belfrage" p. 208.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Munk, "The *Guardian*: From Old Left to New Left" in *Radical America* II:2 (March-April 1968) p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) p. 58.

The emergence of the New Left impacted the *National Guardian* remarkably late in its history. While the paper gradually became a haven for young student radicals seeking work experience or their first full-time positions in the left-wing press, Belfrage and Aronson managed to keep a tight grip on the editorial reins for much of the 1960s. However, a steady shift in the political philosophy of a majority of the paper's editorial committee eventually led to the resignation of its founders. The main bone of contention between the younger editors and their superiors centred on a concern that the *National Guardian* was not "growing with the movements" that had developed during the course of the decade. While they admitted that SDS, SNCC and various other youth-oriented radical groups had been given some sympathetic coverage, the rebels wanted to publish a consciously styled "movement newspaper" that would turn away from "the defensive politics of the 1950s," and embrace "the more assertive movements of the 1960s."<sup>9</sup> These younger editors, as media historian John Downing has since argued, saw themselves as having "the opportunity, even the vocation, to lead 'the movement', to be its intellectual-political mentors."<sup>10</sup>

As a consequence of this disagreement, Aronson and Belfrage resigned from their roles in April 1967, and, under the leadership of new editor Jack A. Smith and cultural correspondent Irwin Silber, the paper was substantially overhauled. First, cooperative ownership and organisational structures were implemented, with an internal memo suggesting that, "the only 'boss' is the collective will of the staff...The guiding principle in the management of the *National Guardian* is creative leadership,

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<sup>9</sup> Jack A. Smith, "The *Guardian* Goes to War" in Ken Wachsberger (ed.), *Voices from the Underground: Insider Histories of the Vietnam War Era Underground Press*, Vol. I (Tempe, AZ: Mica's Press, 1993) pp. 102-103.

<sup>10</sup> Downing, *Radical Media* p. 63.

not stultifying authority; cooperative responsibility, not bureaucracy.”<sup>11</sup> Further to this, Smith, writing on behalf of the coordinating committee, announced that the paper would expand from twelve to sixteen pages, and seek to “contribute toward the development of a radical movement in the U.S.” by emphasising “critical coverage of the movements for social change.”<sup>12</sup> The new editors also set about reorienting the paper’s political philosophy, re-branding it “An Independent Radical Newsweekly” (rather than “The Progressive Newsweekly”, which had appeared on the masthead since 1948). This change was explained in a “Draft Statement on Policy” in May 1967. The document described why the paper would term itself “independent”: “the *Guardian* has no organisational affiliation. Although its political judgements may lead it to closer ties with certain groups (i.e. SDS, SNCC) neither these nor others in the future should be considered ‘chosen instruments.’”<sup>13</sup> In point of fact, there was no significant change in policy embodied in this statement; the pre-1967 paper had never provided a mouthpiece for any particular organisation over another. However, the declaration provides further evidence of the paper’s shift from the electoral politics of the *National Guardian* (which specifically mandated that editors and staff should remain independent of the Democratic, Progressive and Communist parties, rather than various non-party organisations) and towards a conception of social movements as the most important agents within the U.S. left.

The statement of policy also attempted to define the paper’s interpretation of what it meant to be “radical”, arguing that “in a political sense the term implies

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<sup>11</sup> “New Cooperative Structure of the *National Guardian*” (April 11, 1967) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 24.

<sup>12</sup> Jack A. Smith, “Re: New *Guardian* (4<sup>th</sup> Memo)” (December 20, 1967) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 24.

<sup>13</sup> “Draft Statement on Policy” (May 29, 1967) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 24 p. 1.

‘sweeping’ or ‘thorough’ – but not necessarily revolutionary – change.”<sup>14</sup> This argument was closely linked to the concept of “corporate liberalism,” which, the paper’s editors suggested, allowed activists “to see as their opponent not the aberrant behaviour of an otherwise well-ordered society, but a power complex that oppresses at all levels.”<sup>15</sup> Coupled to this approach was “an identity with the emergent revolutionary movements of the economically underdeveloped and externally controlled nations of the Third World – of Africa, Asia and Latin America.”<sup>16</sup> In the immediate period after the takeover, then, the *Guardian* (the “National” was dropped from the paper’s title in March 1968) began to espouse a quintessentially New Leftist analysis of late 1960s America, fusing a systemic understanding of the oppressive power structures that operated in the domestic sphere with an internationalist approach to political struggle. Explicit coverage of the student and anti-war movements therefore grew, with the actions of various groups, SDS in particular, being reported in minute detail. As a consequence, by early 1969 the paper estimated it had approximately 75,000 readers, the majority of whom were actively involved in “the movement.”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, the *Guardian* proved acutely susceptible to the ideological conflicts that wracked the U.S. New Left during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The majority of the paper’s staff was opposed to what they saw as the “ultra-leftism” of the Weather Underground, a faction of SDS that aimed to create clandestine

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 2. For a more detailed discussion of “corporate liberalism” and its relation to the politics of the New Left, see Chapter 1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, “The *Guardian* goes to War” p. 103.



revolutionary cells working towards the violent overthrow of the U.S. government.<sup>18</sup> However, Weather managed to exert a hold over several dissident editorial staff, who, in April 1970, seized the *Guardian's* Lower East Side offices, and managed to continue publishing a new paper, the *Liberated Guardian*, for almost twelve months. Surreptitious publication of the original paper continued during the lockout, but occupation of the original premises was impossible until the *Liberated Guardian* became the *New York City Star* in 1971 and changed its location. The main argument between the factions centred on the question of strategy. A *Guardian* article reporting on the affair criticised the paper's supposed "liberators" for consisting of no more than a group of "fifty assorted ultra-leftists and anarchists," who were misguidedly committed to the "adventurism of small revolutionary action," including terrorism. This approach stood in direct opposition to that favoured by the rest of the editorial collective, who were instead committed to long-term, "mass revolutionary struggle." The article argued that the difference between the two factions was exemplified in their varying approaches to ending the Vietnam War: while those influenced by Weather hoped to "bring the war home" through isolated acts of violence, the majority took a more cautious view, seeing "mass demonstrations against the war" as the only means of halting its expansion.<sup>19</sup> Both groups therefore championed essentially revolutionary political goals, but differed in their strategic approaches, and the success of the majority in keeping control of the paper represented a victory for a Marxist-Leninist approach to organisation, with those involved, Smith and Silber in

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<sup>18</sup> For accounts of the history of Weather, see Jeremy Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, The Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and Dan Berger, *Outlaws of America: The Weather Underground and the Politics of Solidarity* (Cleveland: AK Press, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> "Guardian Offices Attacked" in *Guardian* (April 18, 1970) pp. 1, 10-11.

particular, arguing that the *Guardian* should become directly concerned with patiently building a socialist movement embedded in the working class.<sup>20</sup>

Having dealt with this factional dispute, the *Guardian*'s editors soon found themselves embroiled in another, more endemic ideological debate. The turn towards a Marxist-Leninist political line continued apace during the early 1970s, with Smith arguing in one internal memo, dating from June 1972:

The time has come for a serious re-evaluation of the paper's political approach, with a view toward adopting a sharper, more aggressive and more Marxist-Leninist line to better serve the people...Our goal is contributing toward building a Marxist-Leninist, anti-revisionist party with the objective of leading a socialist revolution and establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat in the U.S.<sup>21</sup>

The conviction that the *Guardian* should actively engage in the process of *party building* was unique in the paper's editorial history. It stemmed from a tour of the U.S. conducted in early 1972 by Irwin Silber, by this time the paper's executive editor, which convinced him that the "New Communist Movement" (the collective term for those groups that were independent of the CPUSA, SWP and various other established parties yet still committed to Marxist-Leninist political action) was in a position to support the creation of its own fully-fledged political party.<sup>22</sup> Numerous editorials and guest pieces were devoted to the topic in subsequent years, and, on the international scene, the paper expressed a preference for China in the aftermath of the Sino-Soviet split, while still allowing for sympathetic coverage of Cuban and Vietnamese communism, thereby cementing its credentials as both an "anti-

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<sup>20</sup> Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao and Che* (London: Verso, 2006) pp. 60-62.

<sup>21</sup> Jack A. Smith, "Re: The *Guardian*'s Political Future" (June 20, 1972) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 26.

<sup>22</sup> Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air* p. 107.

revisionist” and “anti-dogmatist” publication.<sup>23</sup> To this end, in 1977 a number of “*Guardian Clubs*” were established in cities around the country in order to facilitate party building.<sup>24</sup>

However, attempts to establish a new, mass-based Communist party ultimately failed, and by 1979 the *Guardian* had disassociated itself from the party building movement altogether. The final break came when the editorial committee declared that the paper would remain independent of the newly-formed Organizing Committee for an Ideological Center (OCIC), a decision that led Silber to resign his position as executive editor, and the *Guardian Clubs* to split from the paper and change their name to the National Network of Marxist-Leninist Clubs. In an unpublished response to Silber’s resignation letter, the editorial committee suggested that “the very strengths of the *Guardian* as a newspaper point up its inherent weaknesses as the operational and political leadership of an all-sided Marxist-Leninist organisation...The *Guardian* has an enormously valuable role to play in our movement...as a *newspaper*!”<sup>25</sup> Eventually, then, it was recognised that the paper could only survive by appealing to a much broader spectrum of activist opinion than was implied by its attempt to play a central role in the creation of a new Communist party. Once again, a patient, long-term strategic view had won out over a shorter-term approach that would have involved the paper allying itself to a specific political organisation.

What is the historical importance of this ideological parabola – from Old Left to New Left to Marxist-Leninist factionalism and beyond – and how did it structure

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, “The *Guardian* Goes to War” p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air* p. 240.

<sup>25</sup> “Draft Response to Irwin Silber Resignation” (October 8, 1978) *National Guardian Records*, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 36.

the role eventually played by the *Guardian* in the anti-intervention movement of the 1980s? The answer lies in two overlapping observations. The paper's development during the 1960s complicates the conventional timeline imagined by historians to have governed the shift between the Old and New Lefts. As Maurice Isserman has convincingly argued, the manner in which the New Left of the late 1950s and early 1960s (the SDS of the Port Huron Statement, for example) emerged from the Old Left, "makes it difficult to perceive exactly where one ended and the other began", an interpretation that renders the history of U.S. radicalism during this period a "continual process of unfolding."<sup>26</sup> The editorial transition at the *Guardian* proves Isserman's point about the important *continuities* in the history of radical thought and culture during the 1960s, inasmuch as it underscores the fact that Smith, Silber and their radical counterparts decided to take the reins of an established Old Left organ, rather than start their own publication. However, the history mapped above upsets Isserman's narrative by demonstrating how the late 1960s, so often thought of as an era of disintegration and declension for the New Left, actually proved to be a period of ideological and intellectual rejuvenation for the *Guardian*, allowing it to find a new, activist audience, and rethink its relationship to "the movement."

The culmination of the paper's development during the 1970s also highlights the beginning of its shift away from Marxist-Leninist ideological sectarianism and a focus on *party* building – replete with recondite and fruitless arguments regarding "revisionism," "dogmatism" and "rectificationism" – and towards a more ecumenical focus on *movement* building. As will be demonstrated in more detail below, this shift allowed the paper to engage with the Central America solidarity movement on its own

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<sup>26</sup> Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) p. xiii.

terms. In spite, or perhaps because of, the movement's ideological heterogeneity, the *Guardian's* editors therefore came to view solidarity with revolutionary struggles in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala as a key issue in the future of U.S. radical politics, and, in turn, activists within the movement came to view the paper as an indispensable "activist tool."

## II.

There were certain intimations that a shift in orientation was taking place *before* the 1979 split detailed above. For example, in a debate concerning a new plan to boost circulation, Jack A. Smith suggested that rather than focussing on specific audiences already sympathetic to its sectarian line, the paper should "emphasize broad coverage of people's struggles *everywhere*, no matter what their ideological characteristics."<sup>27</sup> However, the attempt to truly broaden the *Guardian's* horizons did not start until after the departure of Silber and the rejection of party building as a political strategy. In 1980, staffer John Trinkl was given the role of improving the paper's "left coverage," a function that was viewed by the editors as "the keystone of the *Guardian's* improvements... a key task."<sup>28</sup> Trinkl's reporting of the anti-apartheid, anti-nuclear and Central America solidarity movements, amongst others, soon became a vital element in the paper's coverage of the Reagan era.

Then, in January 1982 Smith stepped down from his post, and William Ryan was elected as the *Guardian's* new editor. The change took place after several heated disagreements over the internal organisation of the paper. However, in spite of the

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<sup>27</sup> See Jack A. Smith, "Memo re: Plan for Circulation/Promotion" (April 16, 1978) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 31.

<sup>28</sup> Jack A. Smith and Barbara J. Miner, "One Year Plan for Editorial Improvements" (October 22, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 23.

acrimony caused by Smith's resignation, Ryan continued along the path mapped out by his predecessor by further reorienting the *Guardian* towards sympathetic coverage of, and close alliance with, the various "new social movements" that emerged in the U.S. during the 1980s. This is best exemplified in an editorial debate concerning the role and readership of the *Guardian* that took place during November and December 1985. In an internal memo dated 14 November, Ryan suggested that "the paper's target audience should be broad, but within the movement – mostly activists in one or more of the component movements, but also reaching potential activists, people who are just starting on the progressive road." Defining "component movements" as those concerned with issues of anti-intervention, peace, anti-racism, feminism and queer politics, as well as the left wing of the labour movement, Ryan was keen to argue that while the *Guardian* should not seek to become a "mass" paper, it should strive to be accessible to activists from a variety of backgrounds. With all of this borne in mind, however, he was reluctant to relinquish the paper's revolutionary politics: "our perspective is fundamentally rooted in a Marxist-Leninist analysis of the bourgeois state and society and the limitations of reformist strategies."<sup>29</sup>

The *Guardian*'s circulation director, Anne Fuller, clarified these policies a month later. In a position paper summing up several editorial meetings, she started by drawing a line under the party-building phase of the paper's history:

We have said that a dogmatic adherence to organisational structures developed by Lenin was a mistake; that our Marxist-Leninist movement seemed divorced from American reality – in its language, in its hopes for revolution *now*; that both political errors and organisational stupidity helped wreck our movement. We have said that

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<sup>29</sup> William Ryan, "A Perspective on the *Guardian*'s Role, Audience" (14 November, 1985) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 8.

the movement was too politically narrow, that it devoted too much time to debates about questions not very relevant to building revolution at home.<sup>30</sup>

She went on to assert that the paper recognised “mass movements” as “the ones doing the fighting for the most part,” arguing, “we must cheer those movements closest to us and applaud when the others move left.”<sup>31</sup> In conclusion, Fuller weighed the merits of a debate that had taken place between those of her colleagues who argued for “a more loosely defined politics informing our paper” and those who still regarded themselves as Marxist-Leninists, concluding that the paper should “learn from its recent history – not throw it out and start all over again from scratch.”<sup>32</sup>

Read collectively, these internal documents demonstrate a fundamental broadening of the paper’s ideological horizons in the period between 1979 and 1985. In seeking to address a variety of social movements, the paper forced itself to become more ecumenical, and to open its pages to a range of potentially contradictory political viewpoints. The editorial collective also sought to address a specifically activist audience: the new *Guardian* was not designed to shape the opinion of a mass public, but rather one that aimed to influence the decisions of those individuals and organisations that were directly involved in the oppositional movements of the Reagan era. However, the editorial collective was not prepared to renounce its Marxist-Leninist politics. In this sense, then, while the paper’s tactics shifted away from party building and towards movement building, its overarching strategic aim did not: it would remain a *revolutionary* publication in that it was committed to systematic overhaul as the only way of resolving the inequities of American

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<sup>30</sup> Anne Fuller, “To *Guardian* Workers” (6 December 1985) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 23.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

capitalism. However, it began to see its organisational role not as a central participant in the formation of a revolutionary party, but as a facilitator of various heterogeneous social and political movements that would challenge the status quo.

This was a political philosophy that allowed the *Guardian* to win back influential supporters who had become hostile to the paper during the 1970s. After the 1967 editorial takeover, for example, Cedric Belfrage and James Aronson had renounced any association with the new editorial collective, arguing against a sectarian focus on party building:

ideological correctness has become the first order of business...the new *Guardian*...has broken with our founding principle, that a radical newspaper should provide facts for all radicals to fight with and positive commentary aimed to close rather than widen breaches among them.<sup>33</sup>

This judgement, made in 1978, was overturned a decade later, with Belfrage writing to one of the paper's key donors, Corliss Lamont: "I feel very lucky to have such young people keeping the paper as they do. After the years of madness they have come to making [sic] a *Guardian* that Jim and I feel is in the old tradition."<sup>34</sup> Others within the world of New York radical publishing also shared this judgement. In 1977, as the paper was gearing up for its thirtieth birthday celebrations, an invitation was sent to Paul M. Sweezy, then editor of influential Marxist journal, *Monthly Review*. Sweezy's reply is worth quoting at length:

I appreciate the invitation, but I think I had better not accept. I do read the *Guardian* of course, and I find much that is interesting and useful in the information and

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<sup>33</sup> Belfrage and Aronson, *Something to Guard* p. 341.

<sup>34</sup> Cedric Belfrage to Corliss Lamont (September 15, 1988) *National Guardian Records*, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 18.



analysis it presents. But politically you have set yourselves the task of building at least the foundations of a new communist party and I must be quite frank to say that I don't think in the present or foreseeable circumstances this effort can help exacerbating a state of factionalism and sectarianism on the U.S. left that is already bad enough.<sup>35</sup>

Within a decade, however, Sweezy had altered his opinion, to the extent that he agreed to serve on the Inviting Committee for the paper's fortieth anniversary celebrations, along with a host of other radical intellectuals and journalists, from Noam Chomsky and Barbara Ehrenreich to Alexander Cockburn and Margaret Randall.<sup>36</sup> During the 1980s, then, the *Guardian* developed a currency within the left public sphere that it had lost in previous years, a gain that was based, in significant part at least, on the broadening of its political perspective to accommodate a range of radical opinion.

One of the most notable examples of this change was an altered approach to the issue of electoral politics. In keeping with its overarching political philosophy, between 1967 and the early 1980s the editorial collective eschewed electoral engagement in favour of grassroots mobilisation as the only suitable way of building a communist party. While this electoral cynicism was never fully expelled from the paper's approach, the rise of Reaganism initiated a restatement of the *Guardian's* political principles. The change had its roots in the paper's response to the 1982 midterm elections, in which the Democrats extended their majority in the House of Representatives, while the Republicans held on to a slim majority in the Senate. In a "*Guardian Viewpoint*" article, the equivalent of an unsigned editorial, it was argued

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<sup>35</sup> Paul M. Sweezy to Irwin Silber (August 31, 1977) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 1, Folder 30.

<sup>36</sup> Programme for *Guardian* fortieth anniversary party (October 20, 1988) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 19.

that the elections demonstrated the important role that could be played by “a strong grassroots movement”. Referenda against nuclear arms proliferation and in favour of a “Jobs with Peace” agenda had succeeded in various U.S. cities, a sign that the ballot box could provide a “useful tool” for political organisation, and that the “best weapon” the left had was the “slow, patient organising of working people, Blacks, Latinos, and women from the grassroots up.”<sup>37</sup>

These arguments were re-formulated once again in the months before the 1984 general election. In January of that year, John Trinkl circulated an internal memo arguing that 1984 was the year in which the *Guardian* should fundamentally and openly alter its position on presidential elections:

I think the defeat of Reagan offers the *possibility* of giving liberation forces (in El Salvador, Nicaragua, South Africa etc.) a little more breathing space...In El Salvador the day after the 1980 election the bullet-riddled bodies of a man and a woman were found with a sign beside them: ‘With Ronald Reagan we will finish the guerrillas and evil doers in Central America’...Liberation movements are far too respectful of our internal politics to say to left groups that Reagan should be defeated. However, certain broad hints to this effect have been made by representatives from El Salvador, South Africa and others.<sup>38</sup>

Trinkl therefore suggested the paper take a “dual strategy”: seeking to build independent political forces from the grassroots at the local level, but at the national level focussing on removing Reagan from office by convincing the left to vote for his Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “The Elections and Beyond” in *Guardian* (November 17, 1982) p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> John Trinkl, “1984 Election Discussion” (January 5, 1984) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

The subject was eventually taken up in a front-page editorial published in August 1984, which argued that although the paper had no illusions about the Democratic Party, the current political conjuncture required that the “defeat of reaction” form a key objective for the left.<sup>40</sup> Such an ambition would not take precedence to grassroots organisation centred on key issues such as Central America, nuclear proliferation and opposition to Reagan’s cutbacks, the article argued. However, the two tactics would be reliant upon each other: if Reagan was stopped at the ballot box, grassroots organisation would prove to be significantly less problematic than if he remained in the White House for another term.<sup>41</sup> While the paper’s editors were ultimately to find themselves disappointed by the results of the 1984 election, then, their cautious engagement with electoral politics helps to demonstrate a significant reorientation that took place during the Reagan era, with ideological purity coming to play second fiddle to the gritty realities of movement building against the backdrop of a complex and inhospitable political landscape.

Another important issue for the *Guardian* during the 1980s was the manner in which it attempted to build connections with the Central America solidarity movement. U.S.-based support networks for the revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala began to spring up in the period 1979-1980, and the paper’s staff was quick to develop links with them. An external relations report prepared by John Trinkl in February 1981 made clear that the anti-interventionist movement would be one of the *Guardian*’s priority readership targets, with CISPES, NicaNet and the Guatemala Network (soon be formalised as the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala, or NISGUA) mentioned as target organisations with which to develop

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<sup>40</sup> “Reagan Must Go” in *Guardian* (August 8, 1984) p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

concrete links.<sup>42</sup> Over the course of the decade, ties were established that allowed fruitful two-way communications between the paper and the solidarity movement to develop.

As a consequence, Central American revolutionary struggle became a focal topic within the pages of the *Guardian*. Robert Armstrong, a CISPES activist and staff member at the left-wing research organisation North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA), was initially the lynchpin of this coverage. His weekly reports from El Salvador, as well as regular coverage of the Central American region as a whole, were published between 1979 and 1984. The paper's staff regarded his writing as an "extraordinarily valuable contribution...to the effort to put together a stronger movement against U.S. intervention in Central America", and made every effort to provide funding for his research in El Salvador.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Armstrong was treated as a star attraction, taking part in several nationwide speaking tours organised by the *Guardian*, designed to promote both the paper and Armstrong's recently published book on El Salvador.<sup>44</sup> In 1984, Bob Ostertag, editor of CISPES's official publication, *El Salvador Alert!*, replaced Armstrong as regular El Salvador correspondent, and, along with Mike Zielinski (another CISPES activist) continued to provide coverage of the region for the rest of the decade. The *Guardian*'s Central America reporters therefore originated from within the solidarity movement and oriented their analysis towards it directly. The paper also sought to project an image

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<sup>42</sup> John Trinkl, "Re: External Relations" (February 27, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 15.

<sup>43</sup> William Ryan to NACLA (December 21, 1984) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 4; Anna DeCormis, "Re: Armstrong and September Trip" (August 13, 1984) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 3, Folder 3.

<sup>44</sup> Promotional material for event in San Francisco (October 27, 1983) Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-308: Box 3; see also Robert Armstrong and Janet Shenk, *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1982).

of itself as *the* newspaper for solidarity activists by taking out advertisements such as that referenced in the introduction to this chapter. Another example of this approach comes from an advert placed in the programme for the 1985 CISPES National Convention:

There's a national, independent weekly newspaper on the left – the *Guardian*. If you've never seen it you'll be impressed by the *Guardian*'s quality and scope. If you remember us from years ago, you'll be glad to see we're still around – and have changed with the times. Join the tens of thousands of concerned and active people who read the *Guardian* every week – for our in-depth coverage of the “movement”, for our superb international reportage, for our independent perspective on U.S. and world affairs, for the diverse opinions we present. Try the *Guardian*. You'll like it.<sup>45</sup>

Once again, then, the paper positioned itself not only as the publication of choice for the solidarity movement, but also as an ecumenical outlet for diverse opinions on issues concerning its activists.

But how did the solidarity movement respond to these advances? Did activists come to regard the *Guardian* as an important publication, or even vital tool for their political activity? There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this was the case. CISPES regularly released “Resource Lists” to its chapters that were designed to highlight the latest publications on U.S. relations with El Salvador that would be useful to activists. These lists often featured “El Salvador: The Struggle for Freedom,” a special twelve-page supplement published by the *Guardian* in May 1981 and discussed in more detail later in this chapter, and, after the publication of Armstrong's book *El Salvador: The Face of Revolution* (1982), consistently referred to that text in glowing terms, with one internal document going as far as to suggest:

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<sup>45</sup> CISPES Conference Programme (25 May, 1985) p. 36, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-308: Box 1, Folder 3.

“every CISPES activist should have a copy of this book.”<sup>46</sup> *Guardian* articles by Armstrong, Ostertag and other Central America reporters were also regularly reprinted in various movement magazines and newsletters.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, CISPES, NicaNet and NISGUA, amongst other solidarity networks, regularly wrote to the paper to keep its staff updated on their work. In November 1983, for example, Heidi Tarver, then president of CISPES, sent a hand-written note to John Trinkl, along with a “Proposal for a National 1984 Anti-Intervention Campaign.” In the note, Tarver expressed admiration for the paper’s coverage of El Salvador, before asking for “serious considerations of the possibilities for joint work” between the paper and CISPES during the course of 1984.<sup>48</sup> The *Guardian* was thus taken seriously by the Central America solidarity movement not only a news source, but as an important component within the mechanisms of movement building.

As a consequence, a circuit developed between the *Guardian* and the solidarity movement that involved the continual transfer of ideas and resources, allowing both parties to benefit from the paper’s adoption of a more inclusive approach to radical politics. While the *Guardian* provided reportage, publicity and a significant and nationwide voice for those standing in solidarity with the revolutions in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, groups such as CISPES provided an

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<sup>46</sup> “CISPES Seminar: Reform and Revolution” (1983) Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 4, Folder 7. For resource lists, see “CISPES Resource List” (9 December, 1981) Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 3, Folder 26; “CISPES Abridged Resource List” (25 September, 1983) Community Action on Latin America Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-371: Box 3, Folder 25.

<sup>47</sup> Two examples that serve to illustrate this trend are *Nicaragua Libre*, a publication of the Minneapolis Nicaragua Solidarity Committee, and *Basta!*, the newsletter of the Chicago Religious Task Force on Central America. See “El Salvador News” in *Nicaragua Libre* (September 1985) and Paul Martin, “FMLN Charges U.S. Warship Fires on Guerrillas” in *Basta!* (February 1986) p. 16, both of which are reprinted *Guardian* articles.

<sup>48</sup> Heidi Tarver to John Trinkl (8 November, 1983) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 35.

activist public ready and eager to engage with the paper's output. By no means every activist within the solidarity movement agreed with the paper's revolutionary philosophy, but it had grown beyond regarding itself as a crude instrument for short-term party building requiring dogmatic allegiance to a particular political line. Rather, the *Guardian* styled itself as one weapon in an ever-expanding independent media armoury, which could be used by activists in their struggle to challenge the legitimacy of Reagan's policies in Central America, and to build the foundations for a long-term, multi-issue oppositional movement in the United States.

### III.

In an article reporting on the death of Archbishop Oscar Romero in March 1980, an event that, along with the rape and murder of four American religious workers later the same year, brought the Salvadoran civil war to the attention of the U.S. mainstream media, Robert Armstrong remarked on what he saw as the uniqueness of the political situation in El Salvador:

Unlike the Nicaraguan revolution, the Salvadoran revolution has not yet enjoyed widespread international support. Because the struggle is between classes and not against a despot, international governments have been reluctant in giving their backing...International solidarity is gradually becoming the central task of the Salvadoran revolution.<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to *The Nation*, which focussed more attention during the 1980s on Nicaragua than any other nation in the region, the primary focus of the *Guardian's* Central America coverage during the same period came to rest on El Salvador. While there is no evidence in the paper's records to confirm explicitly why this was the case,

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<sup>49</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Gun Battle at Funeral" in *Guardian* (April 9, 1980) p. 13.

it seems safe to assume that the editorial board agreed with Armstrong's argument for El Salvador's singularity: that it was undergoing an as yet uncompleted revolutionary process; that it had garnered less attention in the public sphere than Nicaragua; and that its civil war was a complex social conflict that could not be summarised as a case of "democracy vs. dictatorship."

Regular coverage of El Salvador began in late 1979, with a series of articles by Armstrong covering attempts to establish a united revolutionary front by the country's various left wing forces. In January 1980, the United People's Movement (UP) drew together three guerrilla groups, three popular political organisations and the Moscow-backed Communist Party into an integrated military and political front against the ruling junta, a development that Armstrong argued was a "major step forward in the emerging Salvadoran revolution."<sup>50</sup> To further this positive coverage of left unity, in April 1980 the *Guardian* published an interview with Salvador Caytane Carplo, a leader of the People's Liberation Forces-Farabundo Marti, one of the guerrilla groups that had joined the UP. He described the unity agreement as "the crossroads of an historic moment, the beginning of the common force of all our people to definitively crush the oppression, the misery, the hunger, the lack of democratic liberties...in order to win a popular revolutionary government."<sup>51</sup> Throughout, the interview underscored Carplo's attempt to put factional disputes to one side and emphasise a pro-unity line, an effort that the paper itself evidently supported.

Nevertheless, in September 1980, the UP experienced what Armstrong described as "a profound crisis" after another of the front's constituents, the National

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<sup>50</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Left Unity Pact" in *Guardian* (January 23, 1980) p. 13.

<sup>51</sup> "El Salvador: Revolutionary Confidence, Unity" in *Guardian* (April 23, 1980) p. 14.



Resistance, pulled out in the wake of a disagreement over the timing of its first major attempt at insurrection. In detailing the possible impact of the split, Armstrong accentuated the impact it could have on the “campaign for international solidarity” that had begun to gain important support in the months after the agreement: “unity, arms and international solidarity have been the three critical problems of the Salvadoran revolution. They are inextricably linked. Can unity be restored? It is a vital question.”<sup>52</sup> The crisis of unity was short-lived, however, and in November 1980 an agreement was signed that created the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN). The new revolutionary organisation was named after a peasant who fought with Augusto Sandino against the U.S. in Nicaragua during the 1920s and 30s, and, again, Armstrong found occasion to praise the unity of the Salvadoran left, suggesting that the creation of the FMLN was an “enormous step forward” that would “create a greater mass identification with the revolutionary struggle...and facilitate international comprehension of the developing confrontation in El Salvador.”<sup>53</sup>

Armstrong therefore couched his support for unity amongst the Salvadoran left in terms that played up both its domestic and international benefits. Domestically, the creation of the FMLN would help to shore up support for the revolution amongst the peasant and working classes. Internationally, it would help to undercut the arguments made by the Reagan administration that the Salvadoran conflict was one between “extremes” of both left and right in which neither side truly deserved the support of American citizens. Armstrong’s reports also demonstrate the manner in which the *Guardian*’s own ideological temperament was reflected in its coverage of Central America: in siding explicitly with the cause of left unity rather than engaging

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Armstrong, “Crisis for the Left” in *Guardian* (September 24, 1980) p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> Robert Armstrong, “Left Unity Restored in El Salvador” in *Guardian* (November 8, 1980) p. 24.

in factional disputes, the paper once again demonstrated the impact of its turn between 1979 and 1980 towards promoting a broad-based, heterogeneous oppositional force both at home and abroad.

The paper's coverage of El Salvador also went to great lengths to argue against the Reagan administration's attempts during the course of its first year in office to justify U.S. intervention by raising the spectre of Soviet, Chinese, Cuban and Nicaraguan efforts to destabilise the nation. In the paper's regular "Liberation Movements" section, which presented reports of ongoing struggles for national independence throughout the Third World, Robert Armstrong argued that the sacking of Robert White, a Jimmy Carter appointee as ambassador to El Salvador, formed a "symbolic repudiation of the 'human rights' policies of the previous administration" by Reagan and his foreign policy team.<sup>54</sup> The new administration saw the defeat of the FMLN as its "number one priority", he argued in a cover story a fortnight later, "a lesson to the world that the U.S. defeat in Vietnam was an aberration."<sup>55</sup>

In May 1981, the paper published a twelve-page special supplement entitled "El Salvador: The Struggle for Freedom", which, as noted above, soon found its way onto the resource lists of CISPES and various other solidarity organisations. Introducing the supplement, an editorial surveyed the scene of Salvadoran politics. It detailed the make up and philosophies of the ruling Christian Democrat Party (led by Napoleon Duarte) and its main challenger, the proto-fascist ARENA Party (led by Roberto D'Aubuisson), before arguing that, in opposition to these repressive forces, the FMLN was "backed by the masses and entirely independent of foreign control. The fronts enjoy the support of virtually every strata of Salvadoran society outside the

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<sup>54</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Intervention Near" in *Guardian* (January 28, 1981) p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Armstrong, "El Salvador: Reagan's Test Case" in *Guardian* (February 25, 1981) pp. 1, 15.

military, the land-owning oligarchy and what Marxists term the comprador bourgeoisie.”<sup>56</sup> The piece went on to argue that the main context of the Salvadoran civil war that U.S. leftists needed to understand, beyond the specific national conditions noted above, was the Reagan administration’s “monomaniacal drive” for global dominance: “U.S. imperialism evidently thinks it can win a cheap military victory in this little country that will show that the U.S. is standing up to the USSR and threats to Washington’s hegemony throughout the world.”<sup>57</sup> In order to oppose the monolithic power of American interventionism in El Salvador, it was suggested that “anyone who respects freedom should support the FMLN struggle” as part of a broader effort to oppose Reagan’s policies, both foreign and domestic.<sup>58</sup>

The supplement also included an essay by Armstrong assessing the administration’s interests in promoting “a subtle blend of reform and repression” in El Salvador. First, he argued, policy makers sought to protect the *economic* interests of the various U.S.-based multinational corporations that had benefited from three decades of Salvadoran industrialisation. Second, the U.S. had perceived *strategic* interests in El Salvador based on a regional version of the “domino theory.” Third, the administration had *political* interests: it could not risk the loss of domestic prestige that would result from a victory for the FMLN. In conclusion, Armstrong echoed the tone of the editorial in trumpeting the North American solidarity movement:

while Reagan recites obituary notices for the “post-Vietnam Syndrome” era, the largest and most militant anti-war demonstrations in over a decade are taking place

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<sup>56</sup> “El Salvador: The Struggle for Freedom” in *Guardian* (May 6, 1981) p. S-1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* pp. S-1-S-2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. S-2.

beneath his windows. Together with the fighting forces of the Salvadoran people, this movement may help stay his hand.<sup>59</sup>

Following on from Armstrong's piece were, amongst others, an article by William Ryan on the positive role played by Liberation Theology in the Salvadoran revolution; an essay discussing the role of grass-roots labour organisations in the U.S. that were opposing the support of the AFL-CIO national leadership for U.S. policy in Central America; and, finally, a "Chronology of the People's Struggle", which detailed the development of oppositional forces in El Salvador as far back as the 1890s.<sup>60</sup> In essence, the arguments contained in the special supplement provide an encapsulation of the oppositional discourse contained within the *Guardian's* coverage of El Salvador for the rest of the decade: a class analysis of Salvadoran society combined with an overwhelmingly positive portrayal of the FMLN and a structural critique of the role of U.S. "imperialism" resulted in a spirited call to the U.S. left for broad-based solidarity with the revolution.

The political implications of the *Guardian's* coverage of El Salvador are also revealed in the paper's coverage of the 1982 Salvadoran election. After two and a half years of rule by a military junta headed by Christian Democrat president Napoleon Duarte, elections to the Salvadoran parliament were held in April 1982 in an effort to produce a non-military, democratically representative government. The Christian Democrats, ARENA and the National Conciliation Party (PCN, which represented the military) were the three major parties contesting the vote, with the FMLN boycotting the poll after refusing to sign an agreement to give up their arms for good before

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Why the U.S. Backs Salvador's Junta" in *Guardian* (May 6, 1981) p. S-6.

<sup>60</sup> William Ryan, "Church Workers Side with Peasants" in *Guardian* (May 6, 1981) p. S-9; Dennis Schall, "Unions Blunt U.S. Salvador Policy" in *Guardian* (May 6, 1981) p. S-10; "Chronology of People's Struggle" in *Guardian* (May 6, 1981) p. S-7.

entering the political process. In the weeks leading up to the elections, Robert Armstrong reported that while Reagan's primary aim was for the vote to "stabilise the political situation in America's favour" by confirming Duarte as president and pushing the extreme right to the sidelines, this was unlikely to be the case: ARENA were almost certain to gain enough votes to make them "king-makers." Given that the party's leader, Roberto D'Aubuisson, had rejected the idea of governing in a coalition with the Christian Democrats, whom he dubbed "communists," this would prove the worst possible result for Reagan and the U.S., because, Armstrong argued, a victory for the right "would greatly strengthen popular support for the guerrillas."<sup>61</sup> In another article in March 1982, Armstrong described D'Aubuisson's threat to use napalm against the FMLN if he were elected, and to kill 100,000 guerrillas and civilians in order to gain a comprehensive victory, echoing former Ambassador White's suggestion that the ARENA leader was a "psychopathic killer." He suggested that even the Western media was not immune to the threat of repression, with the release of death threats against various U.S. journalists and the recent murder of four Dutch reporters looming over the electoral process.<sup>62</sup>

When the election results were announced, the Christian Democrats had won more seats than any other party (24 out of a possible 60), but had not done well enough to gain a majority, which placed ARENA (19 seats), and the PCN (14 seats) in the driving seat when it came to negotiations to form a coalition. Armstrong poured scorn on "jubilant U.S. officials" who went in front of TV cameras to declare the poll a triumph for democracy in El Salvador, given an unexpectedly high turnout. Not only had numbers been exceptionally low in the areas under FMLN control, but many of

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<sup>61</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Salvador Vote May Backfire for U.S." in *Guardian* (March 17, 1982) pp. 1, 13.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Armstrong, "El Salvador at Crossroads" in *Guardian* (March 31, 1982) pp. 1, 14.

those who had voted felt compelled to do so by the threat of reprisals from ARENA and its associated death squads. In fact, Armstrong argued, the polling had “backfired completely” for Washington.<sup>63</sup> This conclusion was reinforced in an editorial published a week later, which argued:

It may be a cliché, but nearly all serious observers think the elections have settled nothing. The war will go on until the U.S. removes its objection to negotiation or until the guerrillas win. The contradictions inherent in the new regime make the situation more unstable than ever.<sup>64</sup>

A no less polemical approach to the topic was apparent in an opinion piece published a few weeks later in April 1982 by James Petras, a leftist sociologist of Latin America. Petras turned his attention to an analysis of the surprisingly high voter turnout. He explained that the number of voters had only been remarkably high in rightist strongholds where fear of retaliation amongst the population was strongest, therefore arguing that the election result represented “not support for the right...but the decline in the mass political and social organisation of the opposition.”<sup>65</sup> In this formulation, as the Salvadoran left had turned its attention to violent confrontation with the military and right-wing forces, its ability to provide powerful, effective unions and coherent community organisations had faded. This meant that supporters of the left in many parts of the country simply did not feel safe enough to enact the electoral boycott proposed by the FMLN.<sup>66</sup> Petras posited the complex class nature of the Salvadoran conflict: “thoughtful reflections on the elections should serve the purpose of reminding the left that the current wave of opposition to the political

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<sup>63</sup> Robert Armstrong, “New Crisis for U.S. in El Salvador” in *Guardian* (April 7, 1982) pp. 1, 13.

<sup>64</sup> “Right Coalition Emerges” in *Guardian* (April 14, 1982) p. 15.

<sup>65</sup> James Petras, “Behind the Salvador Vote Turnout” in *Guardian* (April 28, 1982) p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 20.

regime is rooted in the class demands of the propertyless in the countryside and in the city.”<sup>67</sup>

There is not enough space in this chapter to delve further into the manner in which the *Guardian* covered the trials and tribulations of the Salvadoran civil war in the years after 1982. However, time after time the paper’s coverage, which was more detailed and comprehensive than any other publication in the left public sphere, returned to an examination of the economic and social foundations that, in its analysis, determined El Salvador’s political structure. As is to be expected from a consciously Marxist publication, class, even if in subtle and unexpected forms, ruled the analytical roost. Coverage consistently described the relationship between the U.S. and its Salvadoran clients in the structural terms of imperial domination. Unlike *The Nation*, then, the paper had no recourse to constitutionalist demands that Congress hold the Reagan administration to account over its diplomatic felonies. The main responsibility for the overthrow of U.S. domination therefore lay in the hands of a united Salvadoran left in the form of the FMLN, the actions of which were reported in overwhelmingly sympathetic terms.

#### IV.

Of course, the *Guardian* also consistently argued that there was a significant role to be played by U.S.-based solidarity networks, and provided extensive coverage of the development of the movement during the course of the 1980s. The first mention of Central America activism appeared in December 1979, in an article reporting on a “National Conference on Nicaragua” held in Detroit that November. Organised by the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 20.

National Network in Solidarity with Nicaragua (which would become NicaNet), it was stated that the event was attended by three hundred delegates, who agreed to adopt a strategy labelled “mass educational work” to develop North American understanding of the Nicaraguan revolution.<sup>68</sup> Several short articles describing the development of opposition to U.S. policy in El Salvador soon followed this initial report, all of which were published as a part of the paper’s “Liberation Movements” section and included lists of solidarity organisations in various U.S. and Canadian cities.<sup>69</sup>

Then, in early 1981, the paper came across its first opportunity to establish significant links within the movement: a mass anti-war rally being organised by progressive coalition the People’s Anti-War Mobilization (PAM) to take place in Washington, D.C. on May Day of that year. Internally, the impending demonstration was a cause for excitement amongst the paper’s staff. In early March, for example, editor Jack A. Smith wrote in a memo that the *Guardian* should begin gearing up for “a very big El Salvador/anti-war action” that would require “as many leaflets and current issues of the paper as possible for distribution.”<sup>70</sup> Later in the month, John Trinkl wrote to the editorial collective to inform them of the fact that the *Guardian* would be represented on the mobilisation’s steering committee, a group that would also include representatives from CISPES, SANE and various progressive Black and

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<sup>68</sup> Vicky Baldassano, “Conference Urges Nicaragua Solidarity” in *Guardian* (December 12, 1979) p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> “L.A. Action Decries El Salvador Killings” in *Guardian* (February 6, 1980) p. 13; “March Backs Salvador” in *Guardian* (February 20, 1980) p. 13; “U.S. Actions on El Salvador” in *Guardian* (April 2, 1980) p. 5; Robert Armstrong, “Pressure on the Junta” in *Guardian* (May 7, 1980) p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Jack A. Smith, untitled memo (March 10, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 16.



anti-racist organisations.<sup>71</sup> Evidently, the paper and its staff were seen as integral to the ongoing effort to build a nation-wide solidarity movement.

Trinkl also published several articles in the *Guardian* during March and April 1981 that actively promoted the anti-war demonstration, arguing that it would involve a range of activists, “from the Yippies to the Marxist Leninist Party USA”, who would come together to form “the broadest left and progressive gathering in recent years.”<sup>72</sup> He quoted Marilyn Vastas, a representative of CISPES, who highlighted the role that the solidarity movement could play in the FMLN’s struggle against the status quo: “It will only be through the organized efforts of the North American people that the victory of the Salvadoran people will be guaranteed.”<sup>73</sup> Trinkl’s articles included contact details for anyone hoping to get involved with the march, as well as information about regional equivalents for those who were not able to travel to Washington, D.C. These articles were published alongside posters explicitly advertising the event as a “March on the Pentagon”, thereby providing obvious allusions to the 1960s anti-Vietnam War movement. With May Day fast approaching, internal memos discussed the event as “the largest attempt at mass circulation in the *Guardian*’s history.”<sup>74</sup> It was therefore decided that free copies of the paper would be bundled together with the El Salvador special supplement slated for publication the week after the demonstration. It was argued that distribution of both the paper and the supplement would allow the *Guardian* to have the most significant impact on those in

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<sup>71</sup> John Trinkl, untitled memo (March 26, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 16.

<sup>72</sup> John Trinkl, “El Salvador Demonstrations Blossom” in *Guardian* (March 25, 1981) p. 11; John Trinkl, “Salvador Support Actions Explode” in *Guardian* (April 1, 1981) p. 11.

<sup>73</sup> John Trinkl, “Salvador Actions Proliferate” in *Guardian* (April 9, 1981) p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> John Trinkl, untitled memo (April 22, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 17.

attendance, and would also signal that the paper devoted more column inches to Central America solidarity than any other publication in the left public sphere.<sup>75</sup>

According to the paper's own estimates, 100,000 people marched in Washington, D.C. on May 3, 1981; 10,000 in San Francisco and 5,000 in Seattle. John Trinkl triumphantly described the event as "a multi-issue protest focussing primarily on El Salvador but clearly symbolising the need for a broad, unified response to the entire right-wing offensive." He noted that many of the activist groups involved were "strongly anti-imperialist in both demands and composition."<sup>76</sup> He played up the role of the *Guardian* in "building and supporting" the demonstration, before suggesting that "a foundation has been laid for a movement taking off politically from where the Vietnam anti-war movement ended."<sup>77</sup> Indeed, in the twelve months after the demonstration, the paper saw its subscriptions grow by twelve per cent to 12,050, with an estimated circulation of 30,000.<sup>78</sup> Proud of its role in planning and publicising this mass attempt to defy the interventionist policies of the Reagan administration, the paper saw the May Day anti-war demonstrations not only as an opportunity to boost subscriptions and sales, but also as a chance to make an explicitly political contribution to the development of a mass movement in opposition to U.S. policy in El Salvador. In doing so, they proved that what was good for the *Guardian*'s business model could also be good for the U.S. left, thereby highlighting the paper's signal importance in helping to establish and promote the burgeoning activities of the Central America solidarity movement.

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<sup>75</sup> "Re: Distribution of the Paper and Leaflets at May 3 Demo" (April 24, 1981) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 2, Folder 18.

<sup>76</sup> John Trinkl, "100,000 Unite Against War and Reagan" in *Guardian* (May 13, 1981) p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 1, 5.

<sup>78</sup> Anne Fuller, "Report on *Guardian* Circulation" (8 August, 1983) *National Guardian* Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, MS1060: Box 4, Folder 5.

The paper also helped to contribute to the ideological development of the movement. Indeed, the *Guardian* prided itself on its “Opinion and Analysis” section, in which articles were encouraged “on a wide variety of subjects from many perspectives”, and not always in accordance with the views of the paper’s editors. It was in this forum, as well on the editorial page, that a number of articles were published that intervened in strategic debates that took place within activist circles during the course of the 1980s. The first of these debates focused on the question of whether or not Central American solidarity should be based on “local” activism (i.e. that which focussed on the revolutionary struggles of individual nations), or “regional” activism (i.e. that which focussed on the linkages between liberation movements in Central America). In July 1983, for example, Susan Hansell, a former CISPES activist, argued against what she characterised as that organisation’s “myopic” focus on Salvadoran politics. “Clearly the Reagan administration thinks in terms of the region, and so must we”, she suggested, before asserting that:

The ongoing strength of our movement lies in building Central America coalitions... When the U.S. deploys ground troops in Central America, will the solidarity movement be slugging it out for control of the newest coalition, or will we work together to defend the Central American people’s right to self-determination?<sup>79</sup>

Although there were certain tactical differences between solidarity networks oriented towards one country or another, Hansell argued that the movement’s overarching strategic goals necessitated a distinctly regional view of the conflict between the forces of U.S. interventionism and any anti-interventionist coalition.

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<sup>79</sup> Susan Hansell, “Central America Solidarity Suffers from Myopia” in *Guardian* (July 13, 1984) p. 27.

A month later, Robert Armstrong furthered these arguments. Opinion pieces were conventionally restricted to the back pages of the paper, but in this case Armstrong's arguments made headline news, a sign not only of the author's prominence in the *Guardian's* roster, but also of the significance the paper's staff attached to the debate into which he intervened. Armstrong began polemically:

The defence of the Salvadoran revolution begins with the defence of the Nicaraguan revolution. It is an elementary point. But regrettably those of us in solidarity with the struggle in El Salvador and/or opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America have not been vigorous enough in that defence.<sup>80</sup>

He suggested that because the Nicaraguan revolution succeeded in overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship "relatively quickly," the mass movement that had developed around its defence was nowhere near as large and as passionate as the one that had sprung up in support of the Salvadoran struggle. In Armstrong's thesis, this meant that the Reagan administration had been able to get away with covert intervention in Nicaragua almost unimpeded by popular protests, a situation that could not be allowed to continue. Whatever its faults, the Sandinista government served as an inspiration for the FMLN: "imagine its defeat. Remember when Salvador Allende was killed. How a little bit of each of us died that day. That cannot happen again... Our slogan must be 'Nicaragua Vencerá! El Salvador Vencerá!'"<sup>81</sup> This proclamation went somewhat against the tenor of the *Guardian's* coverage of Central America, which, as noted above, focussed predominantly on El Salvador at the expense of Nicaragua, but again the strategic point was clear: activists should make all efforts to

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<sup>80</sup> Robert Armstrong, "Time to Stand by the Sandinistas" in *Guardian* (August 10, 1983) p. 1.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 27.

focus their attention on the region as a whole if they hoped to understand U.S. involvement there.

Another debate that took on a great deal of significance in the paper's pages was that between "legalist" and "activist" mindsets within the movement. Unlike *The Nation*, which, with some notable exceptions, consistently argued for Congressional action to limit the interventionism of the Reagan administration, the *Guardian* took a more radical line, and sought to highlight the key role that it was necessary for mass oppositional movements to play. Noting the power and vibrancy of Central America activism in 1983, for example, Guatemala activist Jonathan Fried suggested that the movement had "contributed greatly" to a situation in which "consensus in Congress for intervention has been undermined by public pressure at a much earlier point than during the Vietnam War." However, Fried played down the political potential of Congressional lobbying by arguing that "the key to putting pressure on Congress is movement building", and that a "more organic, strategic unity within the Central America solidarity movement" was needed in order to achieve this.<sup>82</sup> Later that year, this opinion was substantiated in an article written by Michael Ratner, president of the National Lawyer's Guild and an attorney in legal cases against U.S. intervention in Central America. Ratner argued, "the failure of even the most anti-Reagan Congress people to take any consistent stand despite stark abuse of human rights in El Salvador suggests that we must pursue a strategy that brings people into the streets." This meant that the movement should seek to argue not only *against* U.S. intervention and sponsorship of human rights abuses, but also *for* the positive aspects of Central American revolutions. This would necessitate the construction of "a long term

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Ratner, "Take a More Positive Approach to Central America Solidarity" in *Guardian* (September 14, 1983) p. 19.

movement that will allow social change in the Third World without repeated intervention”, a goal that reliance on the opinions of progressive and liberal Congress people simply could not achieve.<sup>83</sup>

The final iteration of the argument against legalism came in 1985 from Stuart Ozer, formerly the *Guardian*’s business manager, and by then a NicaNet activist. In an article excerpted from an “open letter” to the Central America solidarity movement entitled “For Solidarity’s Sake, Look to the Street, Not the Elite”, Ozer argued against a “focus on directly influencing the seats of power in the U.S.”:

The bottom line of such an approach is that it assumes these institutions will find it in their own best interests to reject the direction and assumptions of current U.S. foreign policy. This is wishful thinking at best...Elite organising can effectively complement, but never substitute for, the enormous task of building a popular consensus for justice in Central America.<sup>84</sup>

Echoing Ratner’s earlier arguments, as well as the emphasis on class evident throughout the paper’s reporting of the Salvadoran civil war, Ozer suggested that activists work to highlight Central American revolutions as examples to U.S. citizens of the manner in which ordinary people could hold real political power, and institute a restructuring of society and politics in their own interests. This would involve “working to end the wars in Central America by legitimising their new societies to people in the U.S.”, and provided the only approach that could possibly result in the type of “profound social change” needed to prevent the U.S. from intervening on behalf of repressive Third World forces in the future.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

<sup>84</sup> Stuart Ozer, “For Solidarity’s Sake, Look to the Street, Not the Elite” in *Guardian* (November 20, 1985) p. 19.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 19.

The *Guardian* itself explicitly reinforced these positions via a series of editorials. Amidst the controversy over Reagan's proposed escalation of aid to the Contras in February 1984, for example, the paper positioned the Central America movement within a long tradition of solidarity activism that stretched back through the anti-Vietnam War campaign, the Venceremos Brigades that went to Cuba after the revolution in 1959, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade that fought in the Spanish Civil War, and the Anti-Imperialist League convened in 1898 to argue against U.S. annexation of the Philippines. In making this case, the article suggested that while "internationalism begins at home", the most effective form of activism was that which consciously engaged with the struggles of Central American revolutionary groups, thereby eschewing legalistic challenges to U.S. policy.<sup>86</sup> In May of the same year, another editorial made the case even more overtly, arguing: "it doesn't look like Congress is going to put a stop to the criminal activities of this double speaking, criminal administration...Reagan's escalation makes necessary an escalation of our own."<sup>87</sup>

Later in the decade, and in response to a March 20, 1986 Congressional vote to give \$100 million in aid to the Contras, the paper similarly suggested that "a majority of lawmakers in both parties – evidently reflecting a ruling-class consensus – agree that Nicaragua cannot be allowed to continue on its revolutionary course." The article conceded that the solidarity movement had thus far not succeeded in winning the debate over Central America, given that the Reagan administration's "red-baiting" had given rise to a general recognition in the mainstream media and among politicians of the "totalitarian" nature of the Sandinista regime and of the guerrillas fighting in El

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<sup>86</sup> "Internationalism in Action" in *Guardian* (February 8, 1984) p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> "Step Up the Struggle" in *Guardian* (May 23, 1984) p. 18.

Salvador and Guatemala. Nevertheless, it was optimistically concluded that a resurgent and “broad-based movement to oppose U.S. intervention without anti-communist qualification” could ultimately halt this trend.<sup>88</sup> These prognoses were at least partially confirmed in the aftermath of the Iran-Contra affair, when, again, it became clear that Congress could not be relied on to oppose the Reagan Doctrine, “even after its criminal nature has been exposed”, and that the only true opposition could be formed by “recharged and broadened solidarity movement” on the streets rather than in the corridors of power.<sup>89</sup>

The *Guardian*’s coverage of the solidarity movement therefore neatly highlights the three specific ways in which the paper contributed to the effort to end U.S. intervention in Central America during the 1980s. First, its staff helped to organise and publicise anti-war and solidarity demonstrations such as that on May 3, 1980. Second, the paper contributed to the ideological development of the movement by publicising debates such as those between “localism “ and “regionalism”, and “legalism” and “activism”. Finally, the *Guardian* played a propagandistic role by repeatedly publishing rousing calls to leftists to join a political movement that was on the verge of victory. The paper’s editors therefore demonstrated how seriously they took the issue of Central America, and, in turn, movement activists responded by publicising its work, and using its pages to promote their own goals.

## V.

The *Guardian* went out of business in August 1992, after almost forty-four years of continuous publication. In one “obituary”, Jack Colhoun, Washington correspondent

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<sup>88</sup> “Solidarity, Not Apology” in *Guardian* (March 26, 1986) p. 22.

<sup>89</sup> “We Can Do It Again” in *Guardian* (April 29, 1987) p. 22.



for the paper from 1980 until it ceased publication, summed up the *Guardian's* history before concluding that the failure to notify readers of its impending closure marked "a sad end for a newspaper with a proud tradition."<sup>90</sup> As this chapter has demonstrated, the paper's coverage of the U.S. left during the 1980s represented something of a return to its original political tenets, as founders James Aronson and Cedric Belfrage had initially conceived of them in 1948. The *Guardian* had evolved first from the political agendas of the Old Left to the New Left and then to the Marxist-Leninist left in the lead up to the 1980s, and while the paper's editorial style inevitably emphasised radical, activist-oriented approaches to political change that were in keeping with its overarching revolutionary philosophy, its staff were still able to strike up a productive, organic relationship with the Central America solidarity movement.

The *Guardian* therefore proved that at the same time as it reported on anti-interventionist activism and the political situation in El Salvador, it could actively nurture the links between solidarity organisations in order to contribute to the development of a mass political movement in opposition to Reagan's foreign policies in Central America. The question of *who* was reading the *Guardian* is more important than exactly *how many* subscribers it had: in this sense, then, the paper differed dramatically to *The Nation*, which had a much larger readership, and aimed to shape the opinion of a broad community of leftists rather than to engage directly in political organisation. On the other hand, both magazines had a noticeable impact in movement circles, and played a demonstrable role in drawing together an "imagined community" of anti-interventionist activists. That this was the case once again

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<sup>90</sup> Jack Colhoun, "The *Guardian* Newsweekly Ceases Publication" in *Radical Historians Newsletter* 67 (November 1992) p. 16.

highlights not only the ideological heterogeneity of the Central America solidarity movement, but also the vital importance of cultural radicalism to the development of anti-interventionism as a key issue for the 1980s U.S. left.

**Section III: Screen Culture**

## **Chapter 5**

### **Anti-Interventionist Cinema at Hollywood's Margins**

The first four chapters of this thesis have highlighted the manner in which radical intellectuals and journalists used their work to engage with U.S. policy in Central America during the 1980s, and how, in a variety of political registers, they sought to forge a sense of solidarity with the region's revolutionary struggles. This was a dynamic that also played out in a third important area of U.S. culture: filmmaking. During the 1980s, a number of filmmakers became concerned with the issue of Central America, and, in attempting to relate their work to the anti-interventionist politics of the period, wrestled with important questions that were at once comparable to, yet distinct from, those that confronted the individuals and institutions analysed above. These questions included: by what means was it possible to raise money to produce films critical of U.S. foreign policy, given the general hostility of major Hollywood studios and national television networks to such subject matter? What were the most effective narrative forms to a) impart a political message to an American audience, and b) represent Central American revolutionaries? Finally, how should political films be distributed to reach as wide an audience as possible, whilst also having a significant impact within the solidarity movement itself?

The final section of *After the New Left* examines the development of a specific type of political filmmaking that grappled with these questions during the 1980s. The films under examination sat on the boundary between drama and documentary, often problematising any strict division between the two by combining elements of fact and

fiction in controversial fashion. Nevertheless, it is useful to treat dramatic and documentary filmmaking separately in order to recognise the distinct challenges faced by writers, producers and directors seeking to engage with radical politics on either side of the narratological divide. This chapter therefore examines three dramatic films produced during the 1980s at the margins of the Hollywood system – *Under Fire* (Roger Spottiswoode, 1983), *Latino* (Haskell Wexler, 1985) and *Salvador* (Oliver Stone, 1986) – before Chapter 6 focuses on the handling of the issue of Central American revolutionary struggle by two sets of feminist documentary filmmakers in *When the Mountains Tremble* (Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel, 1983) and *Maria's Story* (Pamela Cohen and Monona Wali, 1990).

The central protagonist of *Under Fire* is Russell Price (Nick Nolte), an American photojournalist who travels from Angola to Nicaragua in 1979, arriving in Central America in time to witness the culmination of the Sandinista revolution. On arrival, Price has no discernable political orientation: he is in Managua because, in the words of love interest and fellow journalist Clare Stryder (Joanna Cassidy), the city is full of “good guys, bad guys and cheap shrimp.” Nonetheless, as the film’s plot develops, Price bears witness to the inequities of Nicaraguan society and the brutality of the U.S.-backed regime that is clinging to power. He is faced with a crisis of conscience when the Sandinistas ask him to photograph their iconic (and fictional) talisman, Rafael, who has recently been killed by Somoza’s troops, in a manner that makes him appear to be alive. Price takes the photograph, and thereby prevents the regime from receiving a key arms shipment from the Carter administration that would enable it to hold onto power; this, in turn, leads to the overthrow of Somoza and the triumph of the Sandinistas. As a result of his coming to political consciousness, Price

ends the film believing that feelings of solidarity with the revolution are more important than the journalistic ethics to which he had previously subscribed.

*Salvador* tells the story of another American photojournalist, Richard Boyle (James Woods), who travels to El Salvador during the 1980 American presidential election. The film's narrative forms something of an imperial romance "gone wrong". Boyle initially arrives in El Salvador with the primary intentions of surfing, scoring pot and rekindling a love affair with an ex-girlfriend; investigative journalism is of secondary importance. However, he becomes increasingly aware of the negative impact of American involvement in the Central American state when he witnesses a number of documented historical events, including the murder of Archbishop Oscar Romero and the discovery of the bodies of three U.S. nuns and a lay worker killed by a Salvadoran death squad. As a consequence of these shocking experiences, Boyle ends the film espousing a form of highly charged anti-interventionism.

*Latino* tells the story of Eddie Guerrero (Robert Beltran), a Mexican-American Green Beret and Vietnam veteran who is sent to Honduras by the U.S. Army to help train the Nicaraguan Contras. Like Price, he arrives in Central America without a political consciousness, but a combination of factors turns him into an opponent of U.S. policy there. First, he witnesses the violence unleashed upon the civilian population of the country by the U.S.-backed counterrevolutionaries. Second, he falls in love with a Nicaraguan agronomist (Annette Cardona) working in Honduras for a multinational corporation, who becomes sympathetic to the revolution after her father is killed by the Contras. Finally, Guerrero becomes increasingly aware of the ingrained racism of the U.S. Army after he is asked to go into battle without identification tags in order to avoid potential exposure if he is captured. For the powers that be, Guerrero realises, his is nothing more than another Latino body in the

service of U.S. interventionism. In the final scene of the film, Guerrero is shown surrendering to a group of Sandinista soldiers after a failed Contra attack on a cooperative farm. He has come to consciousness, and, whilst he is unlikely to actively sympathise with the Sandinista political project, as a Latino he feels he has more in common with the Nicaraguan people than with the Anglo society that sent him into battle.

*Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* were by no means the only films produced during the 1980s which critically engaged with the politics of U.S. intervention in Central America: contested images of the region regularly made their way to the nation's cinema screens.<sup>1</sup> Dramatic films such as *Missing* (Constantin Costa-Gavras, 1982) and *Walker* (Alex Cox, 1987), for example, also sought to bring the past to bear on the present by exposing the history of American support for repressive regimes in Chile during the 1970s and Nicaragua in the 1850s. However, the three films that are the focus of this chapter each feature central protagonists who experience acute crises of conscience, and each dramatises a specific critique of U.S. policy in Central America. Unsurprisingly, it was not possible for this politicised brand of filmmaking to be funded and produced within the Hollywood system. The first task is therefore to reconstruct the production and exhibition contexts of *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* in order to demonstrate the manner in which they operated within the margins of mainstream filmmaking before discussing the central challenges posed by the "coming to consciousness" political narrative employed in each of the films, and analysing the ways in which ideas of anti-interventionism and solidarity are dramatised. Overall, the chapter seeks to identify the distinctive contribution made by

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<sup>1</sup> For a broad ranging discussion of 1980s American filmmaking and Central America, see James Dunkerley, "All That Trouble Down There: Hollywood and Central America" in *Warriors and Scribes: Essays on the History and Politics of Latin America* (London: Verso, 2000).

feature film to the culture of opposition that emerged around the Central America solidarity movement during the 1980s.

## I.

Born in 1922, Haskell Wexler grew up making short political films about labour conditions in his native Chicago, before joining the merchant marines during the Second World War. He went on to spend the 1950s working his way through the Hollywood union system before winning an Academy Award for black-and-white cinematography for his work on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Mike Nichols, 1966). Alongside other acclaimed work in the Hollywood mainstream, notably on *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967), Wexler sought to make politically engaged, independent documentary films, which he funded with the proceeds of his commercial endeavours: a key example is *The Bus* (Haskell Wexler, 1965), a short film about the Freedom Rides and the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>2</sup> However, his mainstream directorial debut with *Medium Cool* (1969) brought Wexler most acclaim. The film built on the director's involvement with the anti-Vietnam war movement, and culminated with visceral footage of violence outside the 1968 Democratic Party convention in Chicago, thereby capturing the late 1960s cultural and political zeitgeist in a manner comparable to Norman Mailer's nonfiction novel *Armies of the Night* (1968).<sup>3</sup>

*Medium Cool* is today a cult political film, but it suffered for its sympathetic treatment of New Left politics at the point of distribution: Paramount Pictures delayed

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Zheutlin and David Talbot, *Creative Differences: Profiles of Hollywood Dissidents* (Boston: South End Press, 1978) pp. 105-115.

<sup>3</sup> Sharon Monteith, *American Culture in the 1960s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) pp. 97-98.



its release and provided only limited distribution, while the Motion Picture Association of America gave the film an “X” rating, in spite of its lack of explicit material. This was an experience that turned Wexler against the studio system. Indeed, a 1978 profile based on an interview with the director suggested, “Wexler believes that at this stage in the evolution of American cinema, it is exceedingly difficult to integrate social commentary and entertainment in a sophisticated way.”<sup>4</sup> This conviction was born out in the decade-long division the Wexler made between his profitable work for major studios, on films such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975) and *Bound for Glory* (Hal Ashby, 1976), and his self-funded documentary work, in which he formed a partnership with director Saul Landau and filmed sympathetic documentaries about Salvador Allende (*Conversation with Allende* [Saul Landau, 1971]) and socialist Jamaican prime minister Michael Manley (*Land of My Birth* [Saul Landau, 1976]), amongst others.

However, by the time he came to make *Latino*, Wexler had at least partially changed his mind on the question of whether fictional filmmaking could also function as political filmmaking. The film was funded out of the director’s own pocket, primarily from the profits from commercial advertising work undertaken in the 1970s via his company Dove Films.<sup>5</sup> Wexler was therefore able to remain independent of the studio system until post-production, at which point George Lucas’s company Lucasfilm helped to fund *Latino*’s distribution.<sup>6</sup> The film’s treatment of U.S. intervention in Nicaragua was inspired by Wexler’s experiences shooting *Target Nicaragua: Inside a Covert War* (Saul Landau, 1983), a documentary that sought to

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 118.

<sup>6</sup> Wexler had been close to George Lucas ever since he worked on the director’s *American Graffiti* (1973). See Gloria Emerson, “Haskell Wexler Zooms in on Nicaragua” in *Mother Jones* (August/September 1985) p. 34.

uncover the Reagan administration's funding for the Contras. During his time in Nicaragua, the director developed a passionate interest in the politics of the region, and employed Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel, who had worked on *Target Nicaragua* after forging their reputations with 1983 documentary *When the Mountains Tremble* (one of the subjects of Chapter 6), to work as *Latino*'s sound producer and director of photography. Discussing the relationship between *Latino* and *Target Nicaragua* in a 1985 interview, Wexler justified his decision to switch to a fictional storytelling mode: "I didn't think more facts would have any influence on the American people, but that through fiction, one could impact a wider audience."<sup>7</sup> Wexler crafted the film's narrative with the stylistic and narrative conventions of Hollywood firmly in mind, whilst at the same time seeking to circumvent the system's prevailing political conservatism by attracting independent sources of funding.

Born in New York City in 1946, Oliver Stone was a generation younger than Wexler when he came to make *Salvador*. The son of a successful stockbroker, Stone enrolled at Yale University in 1964, but quickly became disillusioned with college life. He eventually dropped out, joined the Merchant Marines in 1965, and ended up teaching English in a school in Saigon, Vietnam. Stone returned to Yale, but again did not graduate, which led to him to join the U.S. Army in 1967. He went back to Vietnam, this time to fight as a private in the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry. After a year's service, distinguished by the award of a Purple Heart, Stone returned to the U.S. and attended New York University's film school between 1969 and 1971.<sup>8</sup> Between 1964 and

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Michael Henry, "Haskell Wexler on *Latino*" in *Latino Press Book* (Cannes Film Festival 1985) <<http://www.thestickingplace.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Latino-pressbook.pdf>> (accessed 11 July 2011).

<sup>8</sup> These biographical details are regularly discussed in most of the scholarship on Stone. Whilst each can be individually verified in the mass of interviews the director has given, Randy Roberts and David Welky provide the best overview in "A Sacred Mission: Oliver Stone and Vietnam" in Robert Brent

1971, then, the director came to political consciousness. Before experiencing the impact of American foreign policy in Vietnam, Stone's politics were shaped by his bourgeois upbringing and attendance at one of America's most elite universities. However, this quickly changed, as he made clear in an interview in 1988: "I suppose if I went over to Vietnam right wing, I came back an anarchist. Radical."<sup>9</sup> Like Wexler, Stone had a markedly political experience during the 1960s.

Hemdale Films, an independent production company founded in Britain in 1967, provided funding for *Salvador*. Hemdale's stated philosophy of backing "interesting and different" pictures enabled Stone to situate himself at once inside *and* outside of the Hollywood mainstream, and allowed the director to engage with political discourses that major studio funding would not have permitted.<sup>10</sup> While Hemdale was not wholly politically motivated in its choice of productions,<sup>11</sup> the company developed a reputation as an independent that was keen to fund films major studios would not.<sup>12</sup> It saw itself as consistently dedicated to resisting mainstream opinions about which type of filmmaking was acceptable.<sup>13</sup> This philosophy was applied to the decision to provide combined funding for *Salvador* and *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), which had been "in danger of never happening" once the director was refused funding by the major Hollywood studios.<sup>14</sup>

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Toplin (ed.), *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History and Controversy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000) pp.66-90.

<sup>9</sup> Marc Cooper, "Playboy Interview" in Charles L. P. Silet (ed.) *Oliver Stone: Interviews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Ross Johnson, "The Battle of the Little Big Films" in *Screen International* 1487 (4 February 2005) p.19.

<sup>11</sup> During its heyday (roughly 1984-1990), the company funded a variety of successful projects, ranging from *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984) to *Hoosiers* (David Anspaugh, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> "Who the Hell is John Daly" in *Interview* 18:8 (1 August 1988) p.92.

<sup>13</sup> "Winning Hearts and Minds" in *Films and Filming* 393 (June 1987) p.15.

<sup>14</sup> "Who the Hell is John Daly" p.92.

Stone's screenplays were reportedly rejected because their subject matter was considered too politically radical, and therefore not economically viable.<sup>15</sup> This was a view Hemdale rejected, primarily because they saw potential box office success but also because the company was "against big names and happy endings", and unafraid to make an audience feel uncomfortable by openly criticising U.S. foreign policy in the manner that Stone's films tried to do.<sup>16</sup> Hemdale consequently provided a budget of \$4.5 million for *Salvador* and \$5.5 million for *Platoon*.<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the films were made *outside* of the Hollywood system: funding from a British production company that actively sought to challenge prevailing stereotypes about which movies should or shouldn't be made allowed Stone to position himself as a maverick, challenging the political and industry status quo.

However, in another vitally important way, the production context provided by Hemdale meant that *Salvador* sat very much *inside* the conventions of mainstream popular cinema. This is made clear in a statement by John Daly, head of Hemdale in 1987, in which he described the audience the company was targeting: "our product is still mainstream; we just aim for an older audience than the studios."<sup>18</sup> The company was not in the business of funding political films that defied mainstream convention altogether, and it aimed to fill the gap between such filmmaking and big studio productions. As a consequence, there was a close fit between the outlook of the company and Stone: whilst the director was keen to break with mainstream political convention, he did not want to alienate mainstream audiences. Neither avant-garde

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Coombs, "Beating God to the Draw: *Salvador* and *Platoon*" in *Sight and Sound* 56:2 (Spring, 1987) p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.92; Karen Stabiner, "Fast Times at Hemdale Films" in *American Film* 12:9 (1 July 1987) p.33.

<sup>17</sup> "Winning Hearts and Minds" p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Stabiner, "Fast Times at Hemdale Films" p.34.

nor rigidly conventional, *Salvador* therefore stood both outside and inside of mainstream cinema.

The inspiration for *Under Fire* came not from its director, Roger Spottiswoode, but from its producer, Jonathan Taplin. Taplin was born in 1947 (the year after Stone) and worked as a tour manager for Bob Dylan before teaming up with Martin Scorsese to produce *Mean Streets* (1973) and *The Last Waltz* (1978). After these ventures, and based on first-hand experience in Vietnam, he developed a strong desire to make a film chronicling the work of U.S. reporters in Third World combat zones. He convinced United Artists to provide money to develop such a project in 1979, but the resulting screenplay was rejected after the company's management changed in 1980 and ultimately deemed the project "too political" for the Reagan era.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Taplin hired a new writing and directorial team (headed by Spottiswoode and screenwriter Ronald Shelton) who travelled to Nicaragua to gain first-hand experience of the revolution and to gather material, in the process making the script even more political by introducing the central motif of a "crisis of conscience." With writing complete, Taplin was able to convince Nick Nolte and Gene Hackman to star in the film, as well as to help structure financial deals, which led in 1982 to an \$8.5 million agreement with independent production and distribution company Orion.<sup>20</sup> Like *Latino* and *Salvador*, then, *Under Fire* was funded and produced at the margins of the Hollywood system: neither fully inside nor outside the mainstream.

While all three films were afforded mainstream legitimacy via limited theatrical and video releases, as well as reviews in prestige media outlets such as the

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<sup>19</sup> Aljean Harmetz, "5 Films With Political Statements Due in Fall" in *New York Times* (September 10, 1983) p. H-11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. H-11.

*New York Times*,<sup>21</sup> their distributors also sought publicity in a number of alternative arenas, each of which demonstrated the films' markedly political ambitions. *Under Fire* was screened privately in September 1983 for Representative Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), then a co-sponsor of a bill to prohibit the deployment of U.S. combat troops in Central America. After viewing the film, Markey commented that it would "give the public at large an insight into the way Central American politics works because it makes clear the indigenous social and economic conditions that spawned the revolution in Nicaragua."<sup>22</sup> *Under Fire* was also screened to an audience of "Capitol Hill opinion-makers" in an event co-sponsored by Orion and the National Press Club.<sup>23</sup> In securing both Markey's endorsement and the public screening to Washington notables, the film's producers and distributors demonstrated that they aimed to contribute to the national debate regarding U.S. involvement in Central America. *Under Fire* was positioned as a political endeavour, as well as an artistic one.

During the publicity drive for *Latino*, Lucasfilm employed similar tactics, screening the film in Washington, D.C. before having Haskell Wexler field questions from the audience alongside historian William LeoGrande and actress Daryl Hannah.<sup>24</sup> However, Wexler was also an official sponsor of the solidarity networks CISPES and U.S. Out of Central America (USOCA), and the film consequently found a distribution outlet within these activist circles.<sup>25</sup> To take one local example, the

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<sup>21</sup> Vincent Canby, "Under Fire" in *New York Times* (October 21, 1983) p. C-13; Vincent Canby, "Haskell Wexler's *Latino*, About Nicaragua" in *New York Times* (February 28, 1986) p. C-13; Walter Goodman, "Salvador by Oliver Stone" in *New York Times* (March 5, 1986) p. C-22.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Harmetz, "5 Films With Political Statements Due in Fall" p. H-11.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. H-11.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Krauthammer, "Latino So Comically Inept it Fights Against Itself" in *The Hartford Courant* (November 26, 1985) p. B-9.

<sup>25</sup> Wexler sponsored CISPES alongside Noam Chomsky, Manning Marable, Jack O'Dell and John Sayles, and was joined in his involvement with USOCA by Grace Lee Boggs, Allen Ginsberg and

Minnesota Central America Coalition showcased the film as the centrepiece of their “Central America Week” events in March 1986, and *Latino* was screened on many occasions in the following months as part of a special Central America series of films at the Jerome Hill Theater in St. Paul.<sup>26</sup> Again, then, the film’s distributors looked beyond mainstream audiences in order to give the film an explicitly political resonance.

While most U.S. media outlets gave *Salvador* scant attention compared with Stone’s award-winning *Platoon*, the film did provoke controversy in Central America itself, where the Honduran authorities banned its release in 1987 on the stated grounds that its portrayal of El Salvador’s civil war “threatened state security.”<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the film was greeted rapturously at the 1987 Festival of New Latin American Cinema in Havana, Cuba. *Salvador* was screened on several occasions over the course of the festival to “overflowing crowds” before being honoured with the award for the Best Film About Latin America by a Non-Latino.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Mexican director Gloria Ribe summed up the mood at festival by highlighting what she saw as the film’s potential for political change to an interviewer for *Mother Jones*:

If Reagan doesn’t get his way in Central America... Maybe it will be because of films like *Salvador* that present a truer picture of what’s happening in Latin America than the rest of Hollywood’s output. Your Congress makes decisions on issues that affect our lives, and one film could make a very big difference.<sup>29</sup>

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Immanuel Wallerstein, amongst various others. See “List of Endorsers”, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M93-193: Box 1; “National Sponsors of USOCA” in *Central America Alert* (October-November 1983) p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> See advertisements in *Nicaragua Libre!* (March-April 1986) pp. 6, 12.

<sup>27</sup> “Honduran Authorities Ban the Film *Salvador*” in *New York Times* (July 8, 1987) p. C-19.

<sup>28</sup> Clark Norton and Steve Faigenbaum, “Hollywood Hits Havana” in *Mother Jones* (June 1988) pp. 53-54.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Norton and Faigenbaum, “Hollywood Hits Havana” p. 54.

Overall, then, *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* were each conceived, produced and distributed at the margins of the Hollywood system. This liminality, which saw the films embrace traditional modes of storytelling whilst simultaneously dispensing with the limitations of major studio funding, provided a context in which the political impact of mainstream filmmaking could be tested. All three were written and directed by individuals sympathetic with, if not directly involved in, the Central America solidarity movement, and whose lives had been shaped by the wider culture of post-1960s U.S. leftist thought and culture. Haskell Wexler, Oliver Stone and Jonathan Taplin were all part of what has come to be known as the “New Hollywood Left,” a generation of cultural workers “connected to the counterculture and political New Left in spirit and ideas” and committed to forging Hollywood into a “democratically responsive, forward thinking and even potentially subversive set of cultural institutions...through the circumvention of traditional movement forms.”<sup>30</sup> The films therefore offer an opportunity not only to reflect on the diversity of anti-interventionist culture as it developed during the 1980s, but also to interrogate the potential of mainstream dramatic filmmaking to successfully articulate radical political critique.

## II.

This chapter’s examination of *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* highlights several of the problems encountered by historians and film critics who attempt to dissect the political implications of these, or any other, “political” films, and poses certain questions. How do individual films engage with and transmit broad political

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<sup>30</sup> Andrew Schroeder, “Strategies of Cinema: Cultural Politics in the New Hollywood”, PhD dissertation, New York University (2002) pp. vi-vii.



discourses? Can mainstream filmmaking, produced in accordance with Hollywood's stylistic conventions, provide radical critique? Is there a voice for the left in American filmmaking? Such questions require detailed consideration in order to fully conceptualise how cinema engages with politics, and what makes a political film. Whilst it is axiomatic that all cultural texts can be political, in some shape or form,<sup>31</sup> only certain texts have specific and conscious political points to make. *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* each mount a critique of the effects of, and philosophy behind, American intervention on behalf of counter-revolutionary forces in Central America. The central motifs that underpin this shared critique are the "crises of conscience" experienced by protagonists Russell Price, Eddie Guerrero and Richard Boyle, which, in each case, force the characters to alter their opinions regarding the nature of U.S. intervention in Central America.

Focussing on the narrative symbolism of this process of coming to consciousness, cultural critic Fredric Jameson has likened the storylines of *Under Fire*, *Latino*, and *Salvador* to those of the detective story. Rather than being *criminal* detectives, though, Jameson claims that the protagonists of these films are *social* detectives, in that they make "judgements on society and uncover revelations of its hidden nature" by demonstrating how "various individual or empirical events and actors" are representative of "the social order as a whole."<sup>32</sup> The political statements made by the films do emerge out of the relationship between their subjects (i.e. the

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<sup>31</sup> For example, Fredric Jameson reminds us that any division of cultural artifacts into those that are social and political and those that are not is "a symptom and reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life", and, as a consequence, that it is important to bear in mind that in cultural texts, "there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed...everything is, in the last analysis, political." Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981) p.20.

<sup>32</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) pp. 37-39.

journalist-detective, or in the case of *Latino*, the soldier-detective) and objects (i.e. the politics of U.S. intervention in Central America), with the motif of the crisis of conscience acting as the most significant link between the two. In *Under Fire* Price betrays his avowed journalistic neutrality to side with the Nicaraguan revolution; in *Latino* Guerrero ignores orders and gives himself up to the Sandinistas in the full knowledge that his capture will expose the existence of a covert war; and in *Salvador* Boyle observes the shocking crimes of the Salvadoran right and ends up denouncing U.S. policy to anyone who will listen. In different ways, then, each film narrates the story of an individual initially caught up with the dramas of his own life who, through the process of bearing witness to the “convulsive realities of Central America,” develops a political consciousness and begins to act on it.<sup>33</sup> However, Jameson argues that the dualism between the characters’ personal dramas in these films and the actuality of political life in the region is essentially asymmetrical, and that audiences are ultimately encouraged to identify more with the pathos of their protagonists than with the evidence of systematic wrongdoing they uncover.<sup>34</sup>

By looking closely at the mediation of anti-interventionist political discourse in *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador*, the rest of this chapter aims to reassess and nuance Jameson’s arguments. To do this, it is helpful to turn to the concept of the “film of ideas” as articulated by Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo. Discussing his 1969 film *Quemada!* with *New York Times* film critic Roger Ebert, Pontecorvo argued that he was seeking to make “an action picture...that will subtly transform itself into a call for revolution”:

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 41.

We are trying to make a meeting of two kinds of film...We want to join the romantic adventure with the film of ideas. We will begin with the sort of photography, music and dialogue that belong to the classic manner of the adventure film, and gradually, as the story advances, will slide into a more realistic style.<sup>35</sup>

Pontecorvo believed that *Quemada!* could lead audiences to oppose the Vietnam War by loosely re-telling the story of nineteenth-century filibusterer William Walker (Marlon Brando). The central aim of the “film of ideas”, then, was to fuse mainstream narrative strategies with radical political content in order to appeal to a mass audience. With this in mind, the central premise of the analysis that follows is that it is unwise to completely discount the radical potential of a mass media trope such as the “coming to consciousness” narrative. Rather, it is important to provide a detailed dissection of the narrative strategies employed by the films as they dramatise anti-interventionist ideas in order to discern what they can tell us about the cultural politics of the Central America solidarity movement.

### III.

It is first necessary to reflect on the question of exactly *how* a film can engage with specific political institutions and ideologies, and what tactics are open to politically minded filmmakers such as Taplin, Wexler and Stone. This is the type of question that much scholarship on the politics of American filmmaking has avoided: whilst the societal contexts of “politics” (broadly defined) in film have been widely discussed, assessments of ideological or institutional “politics” (more narrowly defined) have largely been ignored.<sup>36</sup> This chapter proposes that *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador*

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Roger Ebert, “Pontecorvo: ‘We Must Trust the Face of Brando’” in *New York Times* (April 13, 1969) p. D-11.

<sup>36</sup> Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) p. 2.

employ four specific tactics in an attempt to impart political ideas to their audiences. First, each of the films is populated with “political mouthpieces”, or stereotyped protagonists who either give voice to conservative ideology, or are used to voice the filmmakers’ own progressive political opinions. Second, all three engage in a critique of the manner in which U.S. policy in Central America was portrayed by the mainstream media, thereby raising specific questions about the responsibility of the press to “speak truth to power.” Third, the films provide sympathetic treatments of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran revolutions, in a series of attempts to deny the Reagan administration’s repeated claims that Central American revolutions were Russian- and Cuban-inspired plots to invade the United States. Finally, the three films also confront attempts by both politicians and filmmakers during the 1980s to place blame for the American defeat in Vietnam on the decisions of liberal policy-makers in Washington. Each of these tactics plays a vital role in dramatising the crises of conscience around which the films’ narratives revolve, and analysis of them thereby helps to highlight the political messages their makers sought to articulate.

Of the three films under analysis, *Salvador* is perhaps the most densely populated with characters acting as political mouthpieces, giving voice to the contesting ideologies of right and left in both North and Central America. Throughout the film, Stone uses brief vignettes in scenes that draw attention to the provision of American funding to ultra-conservative forces in El Salvador. One example occurs during a scene in which Major Max (Tony Plana), a thinly veiled characterisation of ARENA leader Roberto D’Aubuisson, orders the execution of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Coming immediately after the film’s announcement of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 electoral victory, and before its depiction of the archbishop’s killing, the scene provides explicit context for the origins of political violence in El Salvador. It consists

of a long speech by Major Max, delivered during a meal with close political and military allies:

Finally, we have someone in the White House with balls. The time has come for us, brothers...These fucking priests that are poisoning the minds of our Salvadoran youth are going to be the first to bleed. They are pig shit, and this Romero is the biggest pig shit of them all...he will be the first to die. For every single one of our people, we will kill one hundred of them...These shit-faced subversives that have sold our country out to the communists will die...And these pseudo-journalists, sent here by the communist-Zionist conspiracy to confuse our people, they too will die. Now, who will be the one among you to rid me of this Romero?

This chillingly delivered speech demonstrates Stone's interpretation of the politics of Romero's murder. Max's indication that his party's "time has come," because of the result of the U.S. election, demonstrates the links between the Reagan Doctrine and the political violence Max desires: the far right now believes it has a "green light" from the U.S. to purge El Salvador of its enemies.<sup>37</sup> Max indicts a vast conspiracy amongst the clergy, media and a vaguely defined "communist-Zionist conspiracy" for the crime of corrupting the people of El Salvador. By suggesting that all those involved must die before the country will be right again, he legitimises bloodshed by arguing for its political necessity. Through the use of this particular political mouthpiece, then, Stone makes it clear where the blame should lie for the ensuing political violence: if Max and his thugs form the brutal superstructure of Salvadoran repression, American power projection is very obviously its determining base.

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<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this point is doubly important because Romero was actually killed several months *before* the 1980 presidential election. Whilst this removes culpability in Stone's film from the Carter administration, it reinforces the point that, by 1986, it was imperative for the solidarity movement that condemnation of U.S. foreign policy be channelled into an overall critique of the Reagan administration's economic and social policies.

Shortly after this scene, Stone recreates the assassination of Romero. The director's use of Major Max to give voice to the ideas of the far right is mirrored in his use of Romero's (Jose Carlos Ruiz) final speech to dramatise an opposing political viewpoint. Speaking to a church packed with *campesinos* sympathetic to his ideas, Romero insists that there is an alternative to the politics of the Right:

The governing junta has good intentions with their promise of land reforms and their desire to control paramilitary forces in the army. But, sadly, it is a failure, because the power within the junta is the army, and the army itself is an obstacle to the reign of God. They know only how to repress the people and defend the interests of the rich oligarchy...I have called upon the U.S., repeatedly, to stop military aid to the army...We are so poor. The people in Washington are so rich. Why are they so blind? My people, you must look to yourselves in this sad time for El Salvador...I wish to close with an appeal to the army...violence on all sides is wrong. In the name of God, and in the name of this suffering people...stop the repression!

The speech is perhaps *Salvador*'s most eloquent political moment. It reinforces the link between American aid and political violence, and points to the existence of a military-oligarchy complex that enriches a small minority (including those in Washington), at the expense of the vast majority of Salvadorans. When Romero is shot immediately after putting forward these ideas, Stone implies that El Salvador has lost a radical alternative voice to that provided by U.S.-backed politicians, oligarchs and generals.

Stone's dramatisation of this iconic moment is also revealing when, with hindsight, it is compared with the presentation of the Archbishop three years later in *Romero* (John Duigan, 1989), a film that focuses on his political development and subsequent efforts to work with poor and disenfranchised Salvadorans. For Duigan, Romero (Raul Julia) is more complex than the easily appropriated mouthpiece that

Stone chooses to portray. He is represented a political moderate at heart, forced to hesitatingly adopt the more radical views of Liberation Theology as the situation in El Salvador worsens. *Romero's* Archbishop is, for example, much slower than the bishops around him to realise that the Church has an active role to play in Salvadoran politics, an attitude it is hard to imagine Stone's apparently radical figure adopting. This difference is illuminating, because it highlights the fact that Stone, uninterested in the type of meditation on the career of an ambiguous political figure that Duigan's film pursues, was more concerned with harnessing an overtly heroicised mouthpiece (*Romero*), and an iconic moment (his death) as a means to dramatise his opposition to American intervention in El Salvador.

The film's portrayal of the murder of nuns Ita Ford, Maura Clarke and Dorothy Kazel and lay worker Jean Donovan is given much less screen time than *Romero's* killing, but the political implications are similar. The mini-van in which the victims are passengers is run off the road by a group of drunken Salvadoran thugs in plain clothes, and all four are raped before being shot. Their deaths are confirmed when Stone cuts to the discovery of the women's bodies in shallow graves the next day. The dramatisation is deeply unsettling, perhaps even gratuitous, but it is the reaction of U.S. Army Colonel Bentley Hyde (Will MacMillan), an advisor to the American ambassador in El Salvador, in the tragedy's aftermath that establishes the importance of these events to the film's dramatisation of anti-interventionist ideas. Hyde's analysis suggests that because the nuns had entered El Salvador from Nicaragua, and because they were "communist-oriented," their murders may have been, if not justified, then at least forgivable ("it must all have just got out of control"). In this glib and utterly ridiculous summary of the killings, Stone makes the point that no matter how disgusting the violence perpetrated by right-wing forces in

Central America, those in control of American policy are willing to turn a blind eye to, or even to *forgive*, certain atrocities if performed in the name of counter-revolution. *Salvador*'s representation of such iconic moments in the history of U.S. foreign policy in Central America, and Stone's use of political mouthpieces to dramatise their implications, are therefore vitally important to the film's message. They constitute radically minded attempts to expose the bitter hypocrisy at the heart of American intervention in Central America.

In *Latino*, which is set four years after the Sandinistas took power in Nicaragua, Haskell Wexler's characters are political mouthpieces who speak for and against the revolutionary process. Early in the film, the audience is introduced to the Contra platoon Eddie and his comrade Ruben (Tony Plana) are helping to train. Lined up for review in their Honduran camp, the platoon receives a morale-boosting lecture from their civilian commander:

As you penetrate deeper and deeper into the heart of Nicaragua, you must have faith. You must have faith that you are doing something important, something beautiful, and something big. This is a crusade, a fight against diabolical, atheistic communism. The press, and we commanders, tell the world that here in Nicaragua a brave group of select commandos are fighting for freedom. The President of the United States, the most powerful country in the world, has proclaimed you, *you*, freedom fighters!

Much like the speech by Major Max in *Salvador*, the lecture stands as the film's most complete dramatisation of counter-revolutionary ideology. It characterises the Contras as U.S.-backed freedom fighters, combating an evil communist enemy, and sets the conflict in pseudo-religious terms. Its tone is echoed later in the film, when Attila (Ricardo López), another Contra commander, speaks to a group of Nicaraguan peasants before he and his fighters pillage their village and press gang several teenage boys. He argues against the revolution in similar terms to those employed by the



Reagan administration, suggesting, “The Sandinistas take Nicaragua’s sugar and send it to Cuba and Russia. They are stealing our riches and even our religion. This is why we fight.” Once again, then, the revolution is characterised as linked to the Eastern bloc, and the struggle of the Contras as one for national liberation. Of course, the film’s representation of the counter-revolution undercuts the ideas articulated by these talking heads: not only are the Contras themselves inherently linked to an outside force through the presence in Honduras of Eddie, Ruben and various other U.S. soldiers, but their brutal repression of those Nicaraguans unfortunate enough to get caught up in the border raids they launch demonstrates that rather than being freedom fighters, Attila and his men are little more than thugs.

*Latino* is unique amongst the films under analysis in this chapter because it contains political mouthpieces that speak about the revolution as ordinary Nicaraguans experienced it. In this regard, the film overlaps with Wexler’s earlier documentary *Target Nicaragua*, which gives extended screen time to Nicaraguan peasants, workers and soldiers who speak about how their lives were changed by the revolution. After the scene of the Contra commander’s lecture, for example, the film cuts to the El Porvenir farming collective in Nicaragua. First, the audience sees an old woman talking to her grandsons about the Contras: “You know what I’ve just heard on the radio?” she says, “They say the Contras attacked the silos at Ocotal. They’ve done everything possible to screw us, so they can say, ‘See? Sandinismo doesn’t work’.” The film cuts to a meeting of the entire collective, where one farmer recounts the benefits of the revolution by suggesting,

At the El Porvenir collective we’ve managed to achieve a high level of organization. In the past, the rich would come and take the food out of our mouths. Now, thanks to the revolution, we work and produce our own crops. We distribute them to our compañeros, just like brothers.

After this report, however, the mood of the meeting turns pessimistic as the Contra threat is discussed. Several farmers and workers suggest that they feel the collective is unlikely to survive, before a young woman stands up to condemn their negativity: “Compañeros! What’s wrong with you? We must unite! We don’t have to lose the harvest. Please compañeros, let’s help each other and fight together!” In these brief snippets of dialogue, then, Wexler’s characters function to highlight the progress made by the Nicaraguan revolution, as well as the threat posed by the Contras to this progress. In drawing a direct comparison between the words of the counter-revolutionaries and those of the farmers and workers who have benefitted from the revolution, *Latino* makes an explicitly political statement by directly contradicting the widely circulated Reaganite characterisation of the Contras as “freedom fighters”.

In contrast to those in *Salvador* and *Latino*, the characters that act as political mouthpieces in *Under Fire* are notable for their *inability* to forcefully articulate their political ideologies. For example, in the film’s opening scene, which is set in Angola immediately prior to Russell Price’s trip to Nicaragua, the audience is introduced to a character known simply as Oates (Ed Harris). It is evident from the outset that Oates is an American mercenary, and that he has links to the CIA. However, he is never able to fully articulate his reasons for being in either West Africa or, later, Central America. On his first appearance, Oates is travelling with a group of Angolan fighters he believes are government troops until Price informs him that they are, in fact, rebels. Oates expresses his tiredness with the African war by declaring, “Nicaragua, that’s the spot. Cheap shrimp, a lot of rays, and its real thin in the spook department, too. You dig me?” Oates’s second appearance occurs after a group of FSLN fighters engage in a firefight with the Nicaraguan army. In this scene, the Sandinistas manage to kill all of the government troops, but Oates, who has been fighting with them,

survives. Price finds him hiding under dead bodies in a church steeple, and the men swap notes on Nicaragua, agreeing that the country is beautiful before Oates adds crudely, “there’s a shitload of greasers, though.” When Price runs into Oates again outside Managua, he witnesses the mercenary take charge of several summary executions of FSLN fighters. Again, Oates offers nothing more than a glib remark to explain his involvement: “Hey, Pricey! Welcome to Somoza’s meat market. No pictures though, huh? It might look bad.”

In spite of these fleeting appearances and his lack of an overtly politicised voice, Oates is vitally important to the film’s dramatisation of political ideas. This importance lies in the fact that Price asks the mercenary the same question each time he encounters him: “What the hell are you doing here?” Oates consistently fails to address Price’s enquiry, and so demonstrates the intellectual and political emptiness that stands in for a reason to fight alongside the forces of reaction throughout the Third World. He provides his services in exchange for cash, and does not bother to ask ethical questions about the regimes for which he fights. If this is a key dimension of U.S. involvement in the Nicaraguan civil war, then, it is one that Price can only view with consternation and disdain.

Another of *Under Fire*’s conservative characters is Marcel Jazy (Jean-Louis Trintignant). Again, it is clear from the outset that Jazy is a spy for the Somoza regime, as well as for the U.S. government, but he refuses to engage with his reasons for taking up these roles. When Price quizzes him about his profession, Jazy initially responds, “Spy is a non-word, Mr Price. No one is a spy anymore...I am a businessman...Once a week I have lunch with President Somoza to discuss security measures against the Sandinista insurgents.” Minutes later, he contradicts himself by admitting to being a spy, but does not provide justification for his actions, reflecting

simply that he likes “to talk a lot.” Later in the narrative, when it becomes clear that Jazy has double-crossed Price by using his photographs of FSLN fighters to provide Somoza’s death squads with pictures of their targets, the central importance of his role in Nicaraguan politics becomes clear. Once again, though, his inability to give voice to any clear set of political concerns stands as a damning indictment of the forces of order in the country.

*Under Fire*’s final voiceless political character is Anastasio Somoza (René Enríquez). The Nicaraguan president is introduced to the audience while Clare Stryder attempts to interview him for an American magazine. Stryder asks him questions about corruption, his family’s dominance of the Nicaraguan economy and the repression that is evident throughout the country, but he avoids answering directly, preferring to tell her a carefully rehearsed story about his weekly visits to a cemetery to put flowers on his father’s grave, suggesting, “I think people should know that about me.” At the close of the scene, Stryder attempts to draw the conversation back to the political situation in Nicaragua by asking Somoza about the recent fall of León to the Sandinistas, but before the audience can hear his answer, the camera cuts away from the interview, thereby emphasising the fact that Somoza simply *will not speak* about politics. Later, when Somoza reappears in front of the press to announce the killing of Rafael in an ambush near Matagalpa, he refuses to take questions from the gathered journalists, instead simply turning away from the crowd and whispering in the ear of an advisor, “Call Washington.”

Neither Somoza nor Oates nor Jazy give explicit voice to a particular set of political ideas as do characters in *Salvador* and *Latino*. However, their inability to justify their actions continually reinforces the ideas of anti-interventionism by depicting those individuals and groups the American government funded to pursue its

interests in Central America as amoral. The use of political mouthpieces across all three films underscores a key strategy employed to narrate the crises of conscience at the heart of their plots. At one level, they merely contribute to a film's narrative arc, but at another, they stand in their own right as indictments of U.S. policy in Central America. Therefore, their potential for political critique should not be discounted.

#### IV.

As well as using characters to ventriloquize different political positions, the films dramatise key arguments against U.S. involvement in Central America that correspond directly to those made by the solidarity movement. The first of these is made apparent in the films' treatment of journalistic standards. For example, the love triangle at the heart of *Under Fire*'s romantic storyline consists of journalists – Price, Stryder and TV news reporter Alex Grazier (Gene Hackman) – and it is therefore no surprise that the profession is given considerable critical attention. Early in the film, Grazier is on the telephone to New York, attempting to convince his editor to include a story about a nightclub bombing in Managua on the nightly news instead of an item about the Pope's visit to Egypt:

Forget the Pope, Charlie; you get the Pope someplace every week. There's a big story down here because it's the first sign of fighting in Managua...Get a map, Charlie. Look up Nicaragua...We're backing a fascist government here. I know that's not exactly news, but see if you can find an angle, huh?

As an early introduction of the idea that mainstream press institutions were largely uninterested and even ignorant of U.S. involvement in Central America, this scene sets the tone for the rest of the film.

In contrast to the majority of the U.S. journalists in Nicaragua, Price, Stryder, and, to a lesser extent Grazier, come to stand as shining examples of professionalism. They are not content to remain within the grounds of the luxurious Managua hotel that houses the Western press corps, and instead venture to the front line to seek out complex and detailed stories. In a scene towards the end of the film, Price and Stryder have returned from a trip to visit Sandinista insurgents in Matagalpa, and are standing on the roof of their hotel watching Somoza's planes dropping bombs on Managua. Various television journalists are recording reports, and the camera focuses on one in particular, who asks to be framed dramatically in front of the rising smoke, and then begins his report: "This tiny nation of smouldering volcanoes has erupted into civil war. Fighting has broken out in the capital for the first time..." The irony of this vain and superficial report is not only that its methods stand in direct contrast to Price and Stryder's front line journalism in Matagalpa, but also that Grazier had attempted to file a story about fighting breaking out in Managua days earlier, only to be ignored by his editor.

*Under Fire's* critique of mainstream media practice is further dramatised during a scene in Marcel Jazy's apartment. In the heat of the final battle for Managua, Price and Stryder break into the property to escape a group of Somoza's troops, only to find Jazy being held hostage by three young Sandinistas. As it becomes clear that the youths will execute him, Jazy begs Price to photograph the scene: "Your picture of Rafael was brilliant, but I am alive, and better looking. A good-looking Frenchman, with a sympathetic face is murdered in cold blood while fighting for the survival of Europe and America. You will have another magazine cover." Jazy is all too aware that the Western media will be interested in stories and pictures of the Nicaraguan revolution if they feature scenes of romantic Westerners caught up in the drama of its

final days. This scene may therefore be read as both a criticism of mainstream media practices, and a self-conscious commentary on *Under Fire*'s narrative, in so far as it conforms to such stereotypes. Behind the irony of this reference lies a serious political point: the film alludes to subverting mainstream discourse whilst at the same time employing traditional Hollywood melodramatic tropes.

However, perhaps the most illuminating dramatisation of media practice in the film originates not in its representation of journalists, but of public relations professional Hub Kittle (Richard Masur). Kittle is introduced to the audience during the scene in which Grazier attempts to convince his editor in New York to run his story about the nightclub bombing. When Grazier describes Somoza's government as "fascist," Kittle interrupts the journalist: "Alex, come on, there's fascist and there's fascist, let's not throw those words around... There's an untold story here. Somoza has a point of view too, right?" He introduces himself to Price as a representative of public relations company, Lewinsky and Knup, which has been hired to help the Somoza regime with its image in the West. In a discussion with Price, Kittle tells the journalist to grow up, before arguing, "It's very easy to fall in love with the underdog, but there's an upside and a downside to this thing. I just want to remind you that all this stuff about a revolution of poets is total crap." Asked what the upside of the revolution could be, Kittle goes on: "Simple, and it could happen: Somoza destroys the terrorist insurgents, rebuilds the country, shitcans the purveyors of excess, stabilises the Cordoba and is finally beloved as the saviour of Nicaragua. Our pal." The alternative, for Kittle, is apocalyptic: "The Commies take over the world." Later, this image is reinforced when Kittle is shown confirming with Stryder after her interview with Somoza that the president told her the correct story: "Did he tell you about his parents and the graveyard and the flowers and all that stuff?" In highlighting

the conservative role played by U.S. public relations companies in Central America, then, *Under Fire* replicated a popular discourse within the intellectual culture of the solidarity movement,<sup>38</sup> and also extended its critique of media practices beyond the more obvious examples of television and print journalism to encompass those U.S.-based culture industries that profited from their support for repressive Third World regimes.

Much of *Salvador*'s plot also centres on journalistic ethics, and at certain key junctures the film specifically raises the question of individual journalists' ideological integrity in presenting the situation in El Salvador. Throughout, Richard Boyle's analysis of the situation is contrasted with that of Pauline Axelrod (Valerie Wildman), a television reporter for a mainstream news corporation. She embodies the "yuppie" lifestyle that Boyle and his companion Dr. Rock (James Belushi) deplore, and Rock takes great pleasure in spiking her drink with LSD in an effort to "lighten her up." However, the contrast between Boyle and Axelrod's approach to journalism is highlighted much more seriously in a number of scenes. At one point, as the pair talk about Salvadoran politics with a group of other reporters, Axelrod hands Boyle an excerpt from the *Wall Street Journal*. She makes it clear that she will follow its line of reporting: "It's all rah rah democracy and free elections, and that's what the networks are going to want to hear tonight." Boyle reads the article, and reacts angrily: "This article, and you, Pauline, are one hundred per cent full of shit." He tells the other reporters the story of a summary execution he and Rock witnessed in an earlier scene, suggesting to Axelrod, "If you're going to analyse the situation, just analyse it

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Raymond Bonner, *Weakness and Deceit: U.S. Policy and El Salvador* (New York: Times Books, 1984) and Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), the arguments of which are dealt with in greater detail in Chapter 3.



right...I mean what type of democracy is it when you *have* to vote, and when you don't you're labelled a Commie *subversivo*?" She responds mockingly, "You're a real pro, Boyle. That's why you can't last two weeks with the network." The conflict surfaces again when both reporters are amongst a crowd of journalists watching Major Max's speech in response to the assassination of Romero. Max denies all involvement ("in my book, it was the subversives that killed him"), and then takes questions. Boyle goes first: "It is widely rumoured, sir, that you are the head of the death squads that are terrorising the countryside and the cities. Would you care to comment?" In contrast, Axelrod asks a more conventional question: "Sir, the polls show you trailing the Christian Democrats. Are you sure you can still capture both the Catholic *and* the woman's vote?" Boyle is scathing and tells her camera crew, "That's a bullshit question; save the tape."

In both scenes, the contrast between Boyle's journalistic standards and Axelrod's is sharp. Boyle is keen to probe the reality of repression in El Salvador, photographing and reporting on the work of the death squads and asking questions no other journalist dares to ask. Axelrod, however, is keen to report what the major networks and newspapers want to hear, and her definition of the professionalism that Boyle lacks is clearly tied to success within the hierarchy of the mainstream media, rather than to any conception of reporting the "facts". The question she poses to Max also lends credence to the notion that the American media distorted their coverage of the Salvadoran elections to present them as free and fair (as explored in earlier chapters). It skirts around the fact of repression, and allows Major Max to present himself as the moderate politician he obviously is not. As the film's central protagonist, Boyle is heroically cast in opposition to the majority of American journalists in El Salvador. Along with that of his friend, photographer John Cassady

(John Savage), his viewpoint guides Oliver Stone's camera throughout the film and is presented as both objective and politically radical, a radicalism that stems from the contrast made with Axelrod's style of reporting. The existence of this type of media critique in both *Under Fire* and *Salvador* points up the manner in which the films explored the issue of mainstream press and public relations coverage of U.S. policy in Central America and it bears striking similarity to criticisms launched by the Central America solidarity movement.

*Under Fire* dramatises the ethics of solidarity through its portrayal of the Sandinistas. The film's representation of the insurgents is framed during a scene in which Price is sitting in the grounds of a hotel, talking to Grazier and his Nicaraguan translator. Asked about Rafael, the translator answers: "Commandante Rafael. He is either a Marxist dupe of Russia and Cuba or the most popular leader of a most popular democratic revolution. Take your pick." She may be read as asking the audience to make an informed decision as to whether the Nicaraguan revolution was a communist-inspired conspiracy or an indigenous struggle for national liberation. After this scene, each appearance of a group of guerrillas on screen is accompanied by a specific refrain of Nicaraguan folk music, the repetition of which attaches a sense of romance to their cause. Furthermore, as Price and Stryder explore the country, it becomes increasingly clear that the Sandinistas enjoy tremendous popular support: they are regularly greeted by cheering and grateful locals, and, as Stryder points out, "signs for the FSLN are everywhere" in the villages and towns they visit. The film depicts the revolutionary process as benevolent when Price and Stryder visit a Sandinista camp; the photojournalist wakes early to photograph the community, and witnesses the joy of those whose lives have been improved by the revolution. Finally, the film concludes with a victorious Sandinista parade through the streets of

Managua, with participants (Price and Stryder amongst them) chanting “Rafael” and singing revolutionary songs. Overall, then, it is not difficult to discern where the filmmakers’ sympathies lie, and what conclusions about the revolution they are hoping their audience will draw.

As well as this overarchingly sympathetic portrayal of the Nicaraguan revolution, *Under Fire* also contains several scenes pertaining directly to the question of Eastern bloc influence in Central America. For example, Price meets a teenage revolutionary named Pedro, who is more interested in talking to the journalist about baseball than guerrilla tactics or radical politics. He is particularly obsessed with Dennis Martinez, the first ever Nicaraguan to play in the Major Leagues: “Martinez, he is the best. He is from Nicaragua. He pitches Major Leagues...I like the Sandinistas, but I also like the Baltimore Orioles.” Pedro demonstrates that he is no puritanical Marxist, but that he has the same interests as many North Americans of his age. His words are even more poignant because they are the last he utters before Oates shoots him in the back at long range in retaliation for a successful Sandinista attack on a Guardia-controlled church. In another example of an attempt at “connected criticism” of the type discussed in Chapter 1, the audience is consequently expected to think of the revolution as one with which they can sympathise on a human level, rather than a purely political one, while Pedro’s characterisation stands as an attempt to cancel out a stereotyped image of Central American revolutionaries as Russian- or Cuban-inspired Stalinists.

Later in the film, Price and Stryder are taken into the jungle in order to photograph Rafael. They meet the translator from the hotel again, who now reveals her true identity as a mid-ranking guerrilla fighter. She tells Price, “Because Nicaragua will soon be free, we have decided it is time for you to meet Rafael. We

need a photograph.” Price asks, “You mean the Western press needs a photograph?” The answer he receives is succinct and telling: “Mr Price, the world is no longer divided into East and West. It is divided into North and South.” Again, then, the film counters any attempt in the U.S. to understand the Nicaraguan revolution as aligned with the communist “East” by suggesting that the Sandinistas themselves view the world through an ideological lens that sees the primary global fault line not as that between capitalism and communism but as that between the developed and undeveloped worlds.

Whilst *Salvador* does not idealise the cause of the guerrillas of the Salvadoran Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) to the extent of *Under Fire*’s representations of the Sandinistas, the film does make clear that their resistance emerged in response to social problems, rather than their being the spawn of a global communist conspiracy to bring down American capitalism. Midway through the film, Boyle helps take a youngster, Rafael, up into the mountains to join the communists. When Boyle asks him why he cannot stay at home with his parents, he replies, “it’s not safe there any more”, adding sadly that, “in my country, amigo, there is no more God.” There is no ideological fervour in the youngster’s words. Rather, his reasons for joining the rebels are rooted in local problems; he is no longer safe at home and fears that faith in God will not keep him alive. It is made clear that rather than having been lured by communist propaganda and Soviet-inspired dreams of anti-capitalist revolution, Rafael is joining the rebels because he feels it to be a social necessity: a matter of life and death. Through this example, then, the viewer is presented with an understanding of the Salvadoran social situation that complicates the explanation provided by Cold War ideology: that the forces of communism were attempting to colonise more and more of Central America in a gradual attack on the U.S.A. Indeed,

when he commented on the film in 1987, Stone made his attitudes on this issue quite explicit: “American government officials don’t seem to realise that revolution is a response to social problems, not a Cold War game. It’s a North/South conflict, not an East/West one.”<sup>39</sup> In making this point in his fiction film, Stone echoed the ideas presented in *Under Fire*, thereby presenting a clearly conceived revision of Central American history, which sought to explain the communist revolution in relative social terms, rather than those of Cold War ideology.

The intellectual reliance of the Central America solidarity movement on negative historical comparisons of U.S. intervention in the region to the Vietnam War has been explored in previous chapters, but this was a trope that Oliver Stone and Haskell Wexler also employed in *Salvador* and *Latino*. In a speech he made in 1994, for example, Stone described a visit to El Salvador and Honduras to research his film:

When I saw American soldiers in the streets...I asked if any of them remembered Vietnam. These were younger people, but there in green uniforms, just like I was in Vietnam a few years before. And they really didn’t. They were embarrassed to draw any parallels to our behaviour in Central America. I honestly feel they knew nothing about Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, Stone had recreated this experience almost identically in a scene in *Salvador*. The camera interrupts a conversation between Dr. Rock and a young, female, American soldier during a party held to celebrate the election of President Reagan. Rock asks, “Vietnam, you know, Vietnam. Are we going to invade here or what?”

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<sup>39</sup> Stone interviewed in Pat McGilligan, “Point Man” in Charles L. P. Silet (ed.), *Oliver Stone: Interviews* (Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2001) p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> Oliver Stone, “The Dream State of Recent History” (commencement speech given at University of California, Berkeley, May 18 1994) <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Stone/stone-grad1.html> (accessed May 5 2008).

The soldier gives Rock a blank look, and then replies, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was kind of young during all that.” References to Vietnam are also made during an angry encounter between Boyle, Colonel Hyde and CIA agent Jack Morgan (Colby Chester) in the gardens of the U.S. embassy. Boyle directly compares American involvement in El Salvador with previous examples of intervention in the Third World: “Don’t tell me about the sanctity of military intelligence. Not after Chile, not after Vietnam.” Later in the conversation, he makes himself explicit: “Is that why you guys are here, some kind of post-Vietnam experience? You need a re-run or something? I don’t want to see another Vietnam.”

*Salvador*’s final reference to Vietnam occurs immediately after this scene. The camera cuts away from Boyle’s speech, to the lobby of a hotel in San Salvador containing a large group of American soldiers who have just arrived in the country, some of whom are being interviewed by Pauline Axelrod. She elicits the same response from two (“we have orders not to speak to the press”), before she reaches their commander, Colonel Hawn (John MacDevitt). She asks him if the soldiers’ arrival signals “a build-up of U.S. troops here in El Salvador”. Hawn’s reply is a ghostly echo of the means by which war escalated in Vietnam: “These are not combat troops, they are trainers, officially authorised by Congress. I have no further comment.” Whilst Vietnam is not referenced directly, the immediate transition between Boyle’s angry denunciation of Hyde and Morgan’s need for a “re-run” of the war in Southeast Asia and this scene inextricably links the two. Hawn’s assertion that the soldiers are “trainers” rather than combat troops clearly echoes similar assertions made in the years before the “Americanisation” of the Vietnam War in 1965, until which point all American military personnel in Vietnam were classified as “advisors.” In the world of the film, intervention in El Salvador is an extension of the American

interventionist project, in which the lies and propaganda used to justify involvement in Vietnam are recycled in an attempt to legitimate the latest bid for hegemony in the world system.<sup>41</sup>

As each of these examples indicates, Stone uses the spectre of Vietnam in *Salvador* to make anti-interventionist statements that draw negative links between American involvement in El Salvador and previous intervention in Southeast Asia. The young soldier's ignorance of the history of U.S. interventionism, and Colonel Hawn's recycling of the superficial justifications for American power projection imply that the lessons of Vietnam have gone unlearned by those to whom American foreign policy should be democratically accountable – most notably, the body politic itself. Boyle's speech also makes a subtly different point, arguing that Hyde and Morgan are not ignoring or forgetting the lessons of Vietnam, but are tragically *misunderstanding* them.

*Latino* dramatises its critique of U.S. intervention in Central America using a similar set of references to the Vietnam War. For example, immediately after their arrival in Honduras, Eddie and Ruben are being driven to the Contra training camp when Ruben looks out of the window and comments: "This place looks like Ia Drang," and Eddie replies, "It looks more like California to me." The scene acts as the first explicit reminder that both characters served in Vietnam, and initiates a series of comparisons made by Ruben between Central America and South East Asia. However, Eddie's reply also represents an indication to the audience of the character's potential to come to consciousness: he immediately realises that the

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<sup>41</sup> A similar point to that made by journalist John Pilger in the same year that the film was made. In an essay entitled "The Americas – Vietnam Again", he argued that the San Salvador Sheraton "echoed with Vietnam" because of the number of U.S. army personnel in residence. See John Pilger, *Heroes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986) p. 452.

Honduras-Nicaragua border is *not* Vietnam, and that it reminds him more of home than anywhere else. Ruben's second reference to Vietnam occurs when Eddie interrupts him torturing a young Sandinista, asking: "Are we going for the cub scouts now?" To this, Ruben replies, "remember in Saigon, the kid with the shoebox? They start them out real young here too." Ruben's simplistic comparisons once again highlight the politicised links made by the U.S. right between the two conflicts.

However, the most significant of the film's references to the war in Vietnam comes in the immediate build up to the raid that sees Eddie give himself up to the Sandinistas, when the protagonist is discussing the coming action with his superior, Colonel Beckett (Michael Goodwin). Beckett lays down the Reagan administration line, arguing,

We've spent millions down here and the brass want something to show for it...Time has run out. It's clear your guys aren't going to get much popular support, so forget about hearts and minds here. But let me tell you something. This time we are not going to make the same boo-boos we did in Vietnam...We want you to hit a target in deep, but because of public relations we've got to maintain plausible deniability. So you go in sterile, without your dog tags or other identification.

Eddie complains about losing his identity as a soldier so that Beckett is forced to expand: "Now Eddie, I see your point. But there's a whole batch of bleeding hearts liberals that would have a field day if a U.S. army regular got captured in Nicaragua." In using Beckett as another political mouthpiece, Wexler draws another explicit link between U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and the Vietnam War. He is attempting to "learn the lessons" of the earlier conflict by sending Eddie and his comrades into battle without identification, but it is exactly this type of proposal that Eddie finds so repulsive; as he makes clear in a later scene, "If I'm going to die for my country, I want people to know about it." In *Salvador* and *Latino*, then, Stone and Wexler pit



their depictions against the Reaganite attempt to rid the American body politic of its “Vietnam Syndrome,” an attempt that conceived of intervention in Nicaragua and El Salvador as an opportunity to recast the nature of American global power and strengthen U.S. power projection capabilities in the post-Vietnam era. Indeed, it seems clear that both directors saw the “Syndrome” as a constructive factor in American foreign policy-making, one whose influence should be maintained. With these references, as well as with those to journalistic ethics and Central American revolutionary struggle, *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* essentially expand their shared political critique beyond a dramatisation of anti-interventionist ethics to deal with a set of broader issues that intersected the key concerns of the Central America solidarity movement.

## V.

*Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* are, on one level, dramatic stories about the romantic dalliances of Western journalists and soldiers in Central America during the 1980s. However, on another level, all three are also intensely *political* examples of the “film of ideas”. In paying close attention to the precise ways in which they engaged the discourses of anti-interventionism, the primary goal of this chapter has been to emphasise the political intentions of filmmakers as they are made manifest in characters, scenes and dialogue, as well as to evaluate their success in mediating a critique of U.S. foreign policy in Central America. From the outset, those involved in the production and distribution of *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* were forced to find ways to subvert politically conservative industry structures, and to secure financial backing from independent sources. The films found viewers via alternative distribution routes, but their directors also chose to frame their narratives

conventionally, centring on romanticised Western protagonists in order to secure the sympathies of mass audiences. In this sense, they were inherently political enterprises before they even reached the screen.

Even though their overarching narrative strategies were not revolutionary, each of the films also deployed its cast of characters (whether based in fact or fiction) as political mouthpieces, speaking for or against U.S. interventionism in a variety of contexts, but with ultimate authority always residing with its opponents. The filmmakers also engaged with discourses circulating amongst anti-interventionist intellectuals and journalists during the 1980s: a critique of the mainstream media, a sympathetic portrayal of Central American revolutionary struggle, and a negative comparison between the Vietnam War and U.S. involvement in the Western hemisphere. The films therefore meshed with the work of those individuals and institutions analysed in previous chapters, and provided another layer in the culture of anti-interventionism that developed around the U.S. Central America solidarity movement during the 1980s. However, it must also be borne in mind that *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* were by no means politically irreproachable. As has already been noted, none of the films made any truly systematic attempt to give voice to Central American revolutionaries themselves. This remained a gap in the assemblage of cultural forms that was coalescing around the solidarity movement, and it was left to the documentary filmmakers who are the subjects of Chapter 6 to fill it.

## Chapter 6

### Feminist Documentary Filmmaking and Central American Revolutionary Struggle

If we listened to women more carefully...we might find that...international politics generally looked different. It's not that we would abandon our curiosity about arms dealers, presidents' men and concepts such as 'covert operations'. Rather, we would no longer find them sufficient to understand how the international political system works.

- Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*<sup>1</sup>

We make no bones about the fact that this is not a balanced program...It is the story of a woman. It reflects her life, her experiences, her beliefs. It is the portrait of a person whose voice is violently censored in her own country, and whose story never makes it into U.S. media coverage.

- Pamela Cohen, co-director of *Maria's Story*<sup>2</sup>

Writing in 1994, film scholar Paula Rabinowitz described what she saw as a “puzzling contradiction” that emerged during the Reagan era. In a “period of political repression by the New Right” during which public funding of the arts was markedly reduced, documentary filmmaking had exhibited an unexpected “renaissance”.<sup>3</sup> In making this point, Rabinowitz highlighted the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s,

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Pamela Cohen quoted in Howard Rosenberg, “*Maria's Story* Untold...So Far” in *Los Angeles Times* July 28, 1989 <[http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-28/entertainment/ca-322\\_1\\_maria-s-story](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-07-28/entertainment/ca-322_1_maria-s-story)> (accessed 6 March 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (London: Verso, 1994) p. 2.

increasingly large numbers of activists made use of improved access to documentary filmmaking's means of production and distribution – as constituted through the development of affordable, lightweight equipment and video technology – to make films that engaged with a variety of political issues. During the same period, widely distributed, prize-winning films such as *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (Barbara Kopple, 1976) and *The Thin Blue Line* (Errol Morris, 1988) demonstrated the potential impact and critical acclaim that could be attained by politically minded documentary filmmakers.

Documentary film also played a significant role in the cultural life of the Central America solidarity movement. This chapter examines two films that typified the relationship that developed between filmmakers and anti-interventionist activists: *When the Mountains Tremble* (Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel, 1983) and *Maria's Story* (Pamela Cohen and Monona Wali, 1990). *When the Mountains Tremble* is narrated by Rigoberta Menchú, the indigenous Guatemalan peasant-turned-guerrilla and subsequent winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, to tell the story of her people's struggle against the U.S.-backed Guatemalan armed forces. In comparable vein, *Maria's Story* chronicles the daily life of Maria Serrano, a mid-level guerrilla leader in the Salvadoran Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Both films were shot on location, with access to communities that were directly affected by the civil wars occurring in Guatemala and El Salvador during the 1980s. They were also made with the cooperation of activist networks involved in the Central America solidarity movement. Perhaps most significantly, these films were produced by crews containing sizeable female cohorts, and both deploy consciously subjective stories of individual Central American women in order to represent revolutionary struggle in the region, thereby fusing the politics of feminism and anti-interventionism.

To demonstrate the significance of these films for the cultural history of the Central America solidarity movement, as well as the distinct brand of anti-interventionism that they articulated, this chapter outlines the history of leftist documentary filmmaking in the U.S., before demonstrating the links between the films and the development of feminist approaches to international politics during the 1980s. It then analyses the formal and thematic qualities of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story*. Overall, the chapter demonstrates the important contributions of feminist documentary filmmaking to the development of 1980s anti-interventionist culture.

## I.

John Grierson's regularly cited definition of documentary filmmaking as "the creative treatment of actuality" speaks to a common consensus that rather than dealing with "reality", documentaries present interpretations of the world through the medium of realistic narrative forms.<sup>4</sup> However, since Grierson advanced this idea, film theorists have developed a number of more complex theoretical approaches to the relationship between documentary and reality. One such example is Bill Nichols's assertion that documentaries are "fictions unlike any others." This formulation, whilst admitting that documentary relies on narrative structures that are essentially constructed, is still able to articulate the manner in which the form "directs us toward the world of brute reality even as it also seeks to interpret it."<sup>5</sup> Documentary therefore retains what Nichols describes as an *indexical* relation to the historical world, in that it is able to

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<sup>4</sup> See John Grierson, "The First Principles of Documentary" in Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (New York: Praeger, 1971) p. 147. The essays that form "The First Principles of Documentary" were originally published in *Cinema Quarterly* between 1932 and 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991) pp. 108-110.

show its viewers what that world *actually* looked like at a given moment, and then use this information to disseminate a particular argument.<sup>6</sup>

This singular visual relationship to concrete historical reality has long made documentary (whether photographic or cinematic) an attractive cultural form for the left. The existence of such an enduring link to oppositional politics, for example, prompted Thomas Waugh to posit the existence of a type of “committed” documentary practice during the twentieth century, which displayed “a specific ideological undertaking, a declaration of solidarity with the goal of radical socio-political transformation.”<sup>7</sup> Before proceeding to an examination of the contexts that formed *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story*, it is necessary to briefly detail two significant moments in the history of this type of politicised filmmaking, so as to situate the varying ways in which the documentary form was used by Old and New Left filmmakers, and, most significantly, how they conceived of their relationship to their audiences.

In 1937, Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens released *The Spanish Earth*, a film that documented the early months of the Spanish civil war and has been described as one of the American Popular Front’s “great theatrical events.”<sup>8</sup> Following two central threads – the military defence of Madrid by the Republican army, and the social progress made by farmers in the vineyards of a small village named Fuentidueña de Tajo – *The Spanish Earth* favoured the use of “spontaneous” rather than staged or

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Waugh, “Why Documentary Filmmakers Keep Trying to Change the World, or Why People Changing the World Keep Making Documentaries” in Thomas Waugh (ed.), *“Show Us Life”: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1984) p. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998) p. 23.

recreated footage, and attempted to retain a focus on the agency of ordinary Spanish people in their struggle against fascism.<sup>9</sup>

The film's importance in the context of this chapter is twofold. First, in order to gain funding, Ivens joined with notable progressive literary figures Archibald MacLeish, Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos to form the production company Contemporary Historians, Inc.<sup>10</sup> Upon their return from Spain to New York to edit the film, Orson Welles, another cultural leftist with ties to the Popular Front, was hired to read the film's commentary, which had been penned by Hemingway.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, Ivens ensured that *The Spanish Earth* became a constituent element in the cultural nexus formed by those involved in the Popular Front as they attempted to draw various factions of the American left together in opposition to fascism. Second, the significance of the film was affected by its reception context. A few weeks prior to its official release, on July 8 1937, Ivens and Hemingway were invited to screen *The Spanish Earth* at the White House, where it was met with cautious praise from President Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor.<sup>12</sup> The film was then shown in Los Angeles, at the home of actor Fredric March, who invited a number of Hollywood progressives,

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Waugh, "'Men Cannot Act Before the Camera in the Presence of Death': Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth*" in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds.), *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998) pp. 144-145.

<sup>10</sup> The quartet, along with various other crew members, gathered in Spain to shoot *The Spanish Earth* in 1936, with Hemingway soon becoming actively involved in combat scenes, and Dos Passos acting as translator in Fuentidueña de Tajo (none of the others spoke Spanish). Dos Passos left the project, however, after the murder of his friend José Robles – who had been critical of Stalinist involvement in the Spanish Civil War – almost certainly by agents of the Comintern. His departure was prompted by anger at Ivens and Hemingway's insistence that protesting Robles's disappearance and murder would be counterproductive for the future of the film. Upon completion, Dos Passos's name did not appear anywhere in the credits for *The Spanish Earth*, and his contribution was never mentioned by Ivens in the various interviews he gave to promote the film. For an instructive rendering of this story, see Stephen Koch, *The Breaking Point: Hemingway, Dos Passos and the Murder of José Robles* (New York: Counterpoint, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> In the end, however, and ironically, Welles's narration was dropped in favour of a more dramatic reading by Hemingway himself. See Hans Schoots, *Living Dangerously: A Biography of Joris Ivens* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2000) p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 129-130.

including Fritz Lang and King Vidor, as well as literary figures such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Dashiell Hammett, to attend the screening. After giving a stirring speech in which he argued that the Spanish civil war was “as much our fight as theirs,”<sup>13</sup> Ivens succeeded in raising a total of \$17,000 from the gathered luminaries to pay for ambulances for the Republican army.<sup>14</sup> The subsequent nationwide release of *The Spanish Earth* was limited, but the film proved extraordinarily popular, especially in New York, and therefore managed to raise further sums of money for the Republican war effort. Moreover, *The Spanish Earth* was distributed widely among trades unions and political action committees, and succeeded in augmenting awareness of the war in Spain in these contexts.<sup>15</sup>

*The Spanish Earth* can therefore be viewed as a prototypical “international solidarity film,” representing as it does the attempted articulation by one set of leftists of the revolutionary goals of another.<sup>16</sup> In one gesture of solidarity, the film’s crew travelled to the Spanish front in order to obtain original footage, and thereby participated in the conflict they sought to represent. In another, they used their work to promote the political goals of the Republicans, by seeking not only to raise popular awareness, but also to garner financial support for their cause. As will be demonstrated below, these were strategies that the makers of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story* also used. *The Spanish Earth* consequently became a model for the successful distribution of political documentary filmmaking within the mass market, and developed the type of U.S. popular cultural cachet that is almost unthinkable today.

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<sup>13</sup> Joris Ivens, “Speech After the Screening of *The Spanish Earth* (1937)” in Kees Bakker (ed.), *Joris Ivens and the Documentary Context* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999) p. 247.

<sup>14</sup> Schoots, *Living Dangerously* p. 131.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Waugh, “Men Cannot Act Before the Camera in the Presence of Death” p. 136.



A little over thirty years after the release of *The Spanish Earth*, a documentary filmmaking collective was established in New York against the backdrop of the political insurgency of the 1960s New Left. It called itself Newsreel. In the words of one of its founding members, the group aimed

to make films that unnerve, that shake assumptions, that threaten, that do not soft-sell, but hopefully (an impossible ideal) explode like grenades in peoples' faces, or open up minds like a good can opener... We want a form of propaganda that polarizes, angers, excites... a way of getting at people.<sup>17</sup>

Newsreel opened several chapters across the U.S., and established close ties to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). As a consequence, the organisation soon became what Cynthia Young has described as “the filmmaking arm” of the New Left,<sup>18</sup> and acted, in Michael Renov’s terms, as “a consistent source of projective imagination and psychic legitimation” for activists engaged in struggles across the U.S. in favour of students’ rights and against the Vietnam War.<sup>19</sup>

*Columbia Revolt* (Newsreel, 1969), the fourteenth film made by the collective, uses footage shot on location by Newsreel filmmakers to narrate the story of the occupation of several Columbia University buildings by students and SDS activists during the spring of 1968. Throughout most of the film, there is no synchronous sound, and the images of the occupation and its repression by the New York Police Department are interpolated with off-camera interviews with those involved and recordings of student meetings. As a consequence, there is no omniscient narration explaining to viewers what they are seeing, and this narrative strategy, underlined by

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<sup>17</sup> Robert Kramer quoted in “Newsreel” in *Film Quarterly* 22:2 (Winter 1968-1969) p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Cynthia Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p. 6.

the anonymity of all of those who speak, demonstrates the manner in which Newsreel's filmmaking was conceived of as an inherently *collective* practice. *Columbia Revolt's* grainy, low quality print also points up the group's dedication to a "direct cinema" aesthetic, which they used in order to position their films as "self-generated documents of struggle," as well as "sources of inspirational renewal" for the New Left.<sup>20</sup>

Speaking in 1968, Newsreel filmmaker and spokesperson Norm Fruchter told an interviewer that, "none of us are old enough to have any illusions about infiltrating the major media to reach mass consciousness and change it – we grew up on TV and fifties Hollywood..."<sup>21</sup> Those involved in the Newsreel project recognised that the mainstream popularity of an Old Left film such as *The Spanish Earth* was beyond their grasp; *Columbia Revolt* was never going to be screened in the White House, nor would it elicit donations to SDS from the general public. The group's attitude towards mass culture therefore inspired the establishment of a distribution network that would function as an alternative to those provided by mainstream U.S. cinema.<sup>22</sup> Newsreel's central office in New York City consequently sought to distribute its films to chapters throughout the U.S. at low rental prices, and often sent a representative of the collective along with the films themselves, to help with organisation and recruitment.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, the group distributed films made by filmmakers from Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, and Guinea, amongst other nations, in an effort to establish a "Third World anti-colonial common sense" within the American New

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Norm Fruchter quoted in "Newsreel" p. 44.

<sup>22</sup> David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Trenton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) p. 170.

<sup>23</sup> Young, *Soul Power* pp. 117-118.

Left.<sup>24</sup> These distribution practices combined with the alternative aesthetics exploited by Newsreel filmmakers to forge a contrasting paradigm of committed documentary practice to that provided by *The Spanish Earth*.

What, then, is the significance of these examples for an analysis of 1980s documentary filmmaking that emerged as a part of the Central America solidarity movement? The answer lies in the differing conceptions of “the public” articulated by *The Spanish Earth* and *Columbia Revolt*. As a rhetorical form, documentary cinema necessarily assumes a dynamic relationship between a film and its target audience. It is therefore vital to pay close attention to the particular audience to which its makers intend to speak.<sup>25</sup> Whilst Old Left filmmaking aimed to address a mass audience, or *general* public, New Left documentaries targeted a more specific community, or *activist* public. In both cases, the notional existence of a public was important, but the term was interpreted in quite different ways. Much like the filmmakers examined in Chapter 5, who operated at the margins of the Hollywood system, and even the intellectuals and journalists examined in previous sections of this thesis, who divided their attention between specialised audiences of academics and activists and more general readerships, those involved in the production of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* consequently found themselves in an ambivalent position when it came to *who* their audience would be.

*When the Mountains Tremble* was the brainchild of a trio of American freelance filmmakers – Pamela Yates, Tom Sigel and Peter Kinroy – who came together in 1980 to form the independent production company Skylight Pictures. The

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 119. Indeed, Third World Newsreel, the organizational successor of Newsreel, still exists today, and retains a focus on distributing alternative documentaries from the Global South within the U.S. market.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) pp. 5-7.

film originated in a project undertaken by the group to make a set of documentaries for commercial network CBS. In 1982, two hour-long films entitled *Central America in Revolt* and *Guatemala* appeared as a part of the “CBS Reports” series. During the production of these programs, however, the crew collected a large amount of unused material, which they decided to draw on to make their own, feature length film that would eschew the format imposed by network television and consciously adopt a “partisan approach” to the history of U.S. involvement in Guatemala.<sup>26</sup> To raise enough money to finance the rest of the production, Yates, Sigel and Kinroy applied to a variety of funding bodies. The film’s credits list the primary source of funding as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a body established in 1967 to supply congressionally mandated funds to a variety of public media organisations. However, additional funding came from the Canadian Catholic Organisation for Peace and Development, Dutch network VARA TV, and a long list of individual donors.

*Maria’s Story* received its funding from a similarly wide range of sources. The initial monies for the production came from the British television company, Channel 4, which allowed the crew to travel to El Salvador and shoot 68 hours of footage.<sup>27</sup> However, on their return to the U.S. in June 1989, Cohen and Wali still required \$107,000 to complete the film. The project was initially rejected for screening on PBS, and for over twelve months looked as though it might never be realised.<sup>28</sup> However, further funding was eventually acquired from the New York State Council on the Arts, a body similar in make-up to the CPB that operated at the state rather

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<sup>26</sup> Alan Rosenthal, “*When the Mountains Tremble: An Interview with Pamela Yates*” in *Film Quarterly* 39:1 (Autumn 1985) p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Christina M. Riley, “*Maria’s Story: A Question of Passion*” in *UCLA Film and Television Archive Newsletter* (November/December 1990) p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> Rosenberg, “*Maria’s Story Untold...So Far*” op. cit.

than federal level, as well as the Women's Project, the Paul Robeson Fund, and, much like *When the Mountains Tremble*, several individual contributors.

Both films received money from public funding bodies, then, and were intended for screening on public television networks, which would thereby offer access to a mass audience. However, both sets of filmmakers also recognised the importance of *alternative* distribution networks, and sought to collaborate with the Central America solidarity movement in order to establish viewers amongst this specific activist community. In a 1985 interview, for example, Pamela Yates suggested that she wanted *When the Mountains Tremble* to “help organise Americans to stop U.S. intervention in Central America.”<sup>29</sup> With this strategic goal in mind, the film was distributed alongside another Skylight Pictures production, *Nicaragua: Report from the Front* (1983), which had been directed by Deborah Shaffer, a veteran of San Francisco Newsreel.<sup>30</sup> The two films were screened together in order to highlight the interconnections between the diverse revolutionary situations throughout Central America, because, as Yates pointed out: “Although a lot of people know that the United States is involved with Nicaragua, they don't know there is a war going on in Guatemala.”<sup>31</sup> The film's credits thanked the Network in Solidarity with the People of Guatemala and the Committee to Aid Guatemalan Refugees, and it was advertised in the programme for the 1985 official CISPES convention, indications of their makers' connections with the Central America solidarity movement.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> For details of Shaffer's links to Newsreel, see Lisa Maya Knauer, “How the Mountain Came to Filmmaker” in *Guardian* (February 3 1988) p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> Rosenthal, “*When the Mountains Tremble*” p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> CISPES Conference Programme (25 May, 1985) p. 9, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-308: Box 1, Folder 3.

*Maria's Story* was produced by Camino Film Projects, an independent organisation established by Pamela Cohen and other solidarity activists in 1985. Cohen began her solidarity film involvement with Communications: El Salvador, a group that created co-productions between North American and Salvadoran filmmakers, as well as distributing media produced by the FMLN, and Camino grew out of these efforts. The company was designed as "an independent entity aimed at producing documentaries about social change,"<sup>33</sup> and was "committed to providing educational and organizing tools for solidarity and anti-intervention organizations."<sup>34</sup> As a consequence of this cooperation, *Maria's Story* was made with the cooperation of CISPES, representatives of which helped its crew gain access to the FMLN.<sup>35</sup> The film was also screened by CISPES networks throughout U.S., often with introductory speeches by representatives of the Salvadoran guerrillas, and Camino shared a percentage of the proceeds from each premiere with solidarity organisations that helped to sponsor the events.<sup>36</sup>

The committed documentary practice exhibited by the filmmakers therefore emerged within a potentially contradictory production context, one that bore similarities to those that formed *The Spanish Earth* and *Columbia Revolt*, but that was unique to the production and distribution contexts of the 1980s. This uniqueness

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<sup>33</sup> Author's personal email correspondence with Pamela Cohen (August 28 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Pamela Cohen to CISPES (June 7, 1985) Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, M94-308: Box 1, Folder 3.

<sup>35</sup> Author's personal email correspondence with Pamela Cohen (August 28 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Author's personal email correspondence with Pamela Cohen (August 28 2010). Evidence of the manner in which *Maria's Story* was distributed can be found in *Polemicist*, a left-wing student journal with ties to CISPES that ran on the Austin campus of the University of Texas during the early 1990s. In May 1991, the journal advertised a screening of the film, and stated that "on opening night, Gladis Sibrian, a U.S. representative of the FMLN (and like Maria Serrano, a woman originally from rural Chalatanago) will speak." In its review of the film, New York-based radical weekly the *Guardian* advertised a CISPES/MADRE screening of the film at NYU scheduled for March 10 1991. See Scott Bradwell, "*Maria's Story*" in *Polemicist* 2:6 (May 1991) p. 10, and Lisa Maya Knauer, "Maria's Vivid View of Revolt" in *Guardian* (March 6 1991) p. S-8.

stemmed in part from the financial involvement of public organisations such as the CPB and New York State Council on the Arts, but also from the controversy that raged during the 1980s and early 1990s over whether or not the federal government should even permit funding of alternative cultural forms. This debate formed a part of the American “culture wars,” which originated in a basic conflict between liberal and conservative opinion over “how the nation should go about officially proclaiming its core values.”<sup>37</sup> One area of public debate during the period centred on the National Endowment for the Arts, and the question of whether or not it was permissible for funding to be extended to controversial artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. Indeed, public subsidies for documentary filmmaking did not escape criticism in the mainstream press. The 1986 screening of *When the Mountains Tremble* on public television, for instance, caused *New York Times* reviewer John Corry to argue that:

the principal source of financing was the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which operates with taxpayers dollars. Forget the political content of the documentary for now: America won't crumble because of agitprop. A better question is, why should such a vanity production be subsidised? It's like indulging children with toys.<sup>38</sup>

Despite being released seven years apart, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* therefore entered a media landscape defined by contestation over the legitimacy of committed documentary practice. Was the representation by U.S. filmmakers of the lives of individual Central American women and the manner in which they were affected by U.S. intervention an inappropriate cause for filmmakers to take up and for

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<sup>37</sup> Richard Jensen, “The Culture Wars, 1965-1995: A Historian's Map” in *Journal of Social History* 29 (1995) p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> John Corry, “A PBS Documentary on Guatemala” in *New York Times* (January 12 1986) p. C14.

federal or state bodies to fund? Or, were such perspectives on Third World revolutionary struggle an essential corrective to those provided by mainstream television reporting? These questions shaped the reception of the two films, just as their distribution blurred the line between documentary filmmakers' appeals to mass and activist publics.

## II.

Another important factor shaping the intellectual and political contexts of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* was a developing interest amongst U.S. feminists in issues pertaining to international politics, and the growth of what has come to be termed the "global feminist movement." During the period 1975-1985, for example, the establishment by the United Nations of an International Women's Decade, and the organisation of several international women's conferences, tapped into a mind-set amongst feminist activists that emphasised "the idea of a cosmopolitan body of women whose loyalties to the sex transcended their national identities."<sup>39</sup> Prominent works by intellectuals as different as Robin Morgan, Angela Davis and Gloria Anzaldúa emerged out of this context, all of which emphasised the international dimensions of feminist struggle, as well as the important intersections between gendered, racial, ethnic and class oppressions.<sup>40</sup> This shift was mirrored by a reorientation amongst activists towards universalist women's issues in the Third

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<sup>39</sup> Christine Stansell, *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* (New York: The Modern Library, 2010) pp. 355-356. On the UN efforts to develop an international community of feminist activists, see Jocelyn Olcott, "The Battle within the Home: Development Strategies and the Commodification of Caring Labors at the 1975 International Women's Year Conference" in Leon Fink (ed.), *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Cherrié Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (eds.), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown: Persephone Press, 1981); Robin Morgan (ed.), *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1984);



World, such as reproductive rights and genital mutilation,<sup>41</sup> but also motivated feminists to look towards specific national liberation struggles for inspiration, especially those taking place in Central America.

In the aftermath of the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, in which female guerrillas had participated on an equal footing with men, the Sandinista government enacted a number of measures improving the status of women in the country, including the formation of an Office of Women to provide advocacy on a variety of issues.<sup>42</sup> As Emily Hobson has recently shown, these developments meant that the revolution appeared to activists in the U.S. as, “the most explicitly pro-feminist national liberation movement of the post-war era, one that offered reconciliation between the goals of anti-imperialist struggle and of women’s liberation.”<sup>43</sup> As a consequence, a relationship of mutual intellectual and political sustenance developed between the two movements; as feminist thinking bred new ways of approaching U.S. involvement in Central America, so anti-interventionist struggles occurring outside the U.S. bred new ways of thinking about women’s activism. These developments can be illustrated in more detail by means of a brief detour through the 1980s output of poet and oral historian Margaret Randall, and international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe, feminists whose cultural and intellectual work bore striking methodological and cultural similarities to those of the filmmakers who are the primary focus of this chapter.

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<sup>41</sup> On the subject of genital mutilation, see Melani McAlister, “Suffering Sisters? American Feminists and the Problem of Female Genital Surgeries” in Michael Kazin and Joseph A. Martin (eds.), *Americanism: New Perspectives on the History of an Ideal* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Norma Stoltz Chinchilla, “Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: Articulating Class, Gender and National Sovereignty” in *Gender and Society* 4:3 (September 1990) pp. 370-397.

<sup>43</sup> Emily K. Hobson, “Imagining Alliance: Queer Anti-Imperialism and Race in California, 1966-1990” PhD dissertation (University of Southern California, 2009) p. 267.

Born in 1936, Randall spent the 1950s and early 1960s working in avant garde literary and artistic circles in New York before experiencing the turbulence of 1968 in Mexico City. As a consequence, her political development was intimately linked to the second wave of U.S. feminism that developed during the late 1960s.<sup>44</sup> She moved to Cuba in 1969, before relocating to Nicaragua in 1980, where she stayed until 1984. Upon returning to the U.S., she became embroiled with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, which sought to deport her because her writings were deemed to be detrimental to the U.S. national interest, and, since she had relinquished her American citizenship, the First Amendment did not protect her. The case became a major issue amongst activists involved in the Reagan-era anti-interventionist left, many of whom campaigned against Randall's deportation on the grounds that it amounted to repression of political dissent. In 1989, however, the conflict was resolved, and Randall's citizenship reinstated.<sup>45</sup>

At the start of her career, Randall developed a reputation both as a poet and an editor of the transnational New Left literary journal *El Corno Emplumado*.<sup>46</sup> However, by the 1980s she had shifted orientation: starting in Cuba in the late 1970s and continuing throughout her time in Nicaragua, Randall conducted workshops that aimed to teach ordinary people, especially women, to record oral testimony in order to

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<sup>44</sup> Randall has highlighted this link herself. See Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992) p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> For Randall's biographical details, see "Biography" at <<http://www.margaretrandall.org/Biography>> (accessed May 4, 2010) and Dan Georgakas, "New Left Literature" in Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle and Dan Georgakas (eds.), *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp. 551-552. For examples of reactions to her attempted deportation, see Lisa Maya Knauer, "A Cowardly But Unsurprising Decision" in *Guardian* (October 29, 1986) p. 17, and Lisa Maya Knauer, "INS Backs Down in Margaret Randall Case" in *Guardian* (February 4, 1988) p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Randall founded the journal in 1959 in an effort to bring Latin and North American literary cultures into conversation with each other. Published in both Spanish and English, *El Corno Emplumado* consequently published a mixture of poetry, prose, and letters in the hope of fostering a transnational, revolutionary literature. See Georgakas, "New Left Literature" p. 552.

develop popular, self-authored historical narratives.<sup>47</sup> The workshops resulted in a number of edited collections seeking to give Cubans and Nicaraguans ignored by official histories the space to document their everyday experience. For example, *Sandino's Daughters* (1981), which contained the testimony of women who had taken up arms with the FSLN during the Nicaraguan revolution, was intended to document "a different kind of history: women speaking for themselves about their experiences as women, and at the same time analysing the process of political development in their own country."<sup>48</sup> This was a goal that was replicated by feminist activists in other national contexts,<sup>49</sup> and, as will be demonstrated below, can be seen to texture the narrative strategies of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story*.

*Sandino's Daughters*, then, along with several comparable collections Randall edited during the 1980s,<sup>50</sup> acted on the proposition that "feminism is about memory, about re-inserting memory into history."<sup>51</sup> At the centre of Randall's mission was an attempt to develop a *new rhetorical form* of historical documentation that would represent the subjective experiences of women's everyday lives and their own individual struggles against imperialism. Randall's approach to oral history can therefore be viewed as part of a broader development within the North American anti-interventionist imagination, in which Central America solidarity became a discourse that, at the same time as it protested U.S. intervention on behalf of the region's

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<sup>47</sup> John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Randall (ed.), *Sandino's Daughters: Testimonies of Nicaraguan Women in Struggle* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1981) p. i.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Latin American Working Group (eds.), *Central American Women Speak for Themselves* (Toronto: Latin American Working Group, 1983). This collection highlights the intersecting concerns of anti-interventionist and feminist activists on both sides of the U.S.-Canada border.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Margaret Randall (ed.), *Inside the Nicaraguan Revolution: The Story of Doris Tijerino* (Vancouver: New Star, 1978), and Margaret Randall (ed.), *Cuban Women: Twenty Years Later* (New York: Smyrna Press, 1980).

<sup>51</sup> Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage* p. 35.

counter-revolutionary forces, also sought to use specific cultural forms to promote a feminist politics of memory.

Two years younger than Randall, Cynthia Enloe was born in 1938. She took an undergraduate degree at Connecticut College in 1960, and a PhD in Political Science at the University of California, Berkeley, which she completed in 1967. Whilst Enloe was involved in Berkeley's Free Speech Movement, she admits to having only been on the fringes of the developing Women's Movement, and has acknowledged that she did not even use the term "woman" in her doctoral dissertation, which focussed on multi-ethnic politics in Malaysia.<sup>52</sup> However, as her career progressed Enloe became one of the leading practitioners and theorists of feminist International Relations scholarship. The shift towards feminism in Enloe's research occurred during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and resulted in the publication of her first explicitly feminist work, *Does Khaki Become You?* in 1983, the Preface to which claimed that,

So much of military history and current commentary on weapons, wars and defense spending is written as though women didn't exist...It seems to me that by revealing both how military forces have depended on women and have tried to hide that dependence, we, as women, can expose a vulnerable side of the military which is often overlooked.<sup>53</sup>

The book included discussion of the militarisation of prostitution, military wives, and the role of nurses in modern militaries. Its most significant contribution in the context of this chapter was Enloe's examination of the role of women in national liberation

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<sup>52</sup> "Interview with Professor Cynthia Enloe" in *Review of International Studies* 27:4 (October 2001) pp. 651-652.

<sup>53</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (Boston: South End Press, 1983) p. v.

armies, in particular that of Nicaragua. She began by posing a question: "To what extent does participation in insurgent anti-state military forces emancipate women?"<sup>54</sup> The answer, in the case of Nicaragua at least, was by no means simple. Whilst Enloe found evidence to suggest that women saw their active involvement in the Sandinistas' guerrilla campaigns as a means by which they could "change relations between women and men in Nicaragua," she also worried that the post-revolutionary Nicaraguan army was maintaining the traditional sexual division of labour by reverting to a "masculine state-authorised institution."<sup>55</sup>

In 1985, Enloe published an article in *Radical America* entitled "Bananas, Bases, and Patriarchy: Some Feminist Questions About the Militarization of Central America." It argued that the relationships of dependency that characterised the international political economy were more gendered than previous scholarship had acknowledged. Enloe suggested that this conclusion had a direct relevance to the Central America solidarity movement: "when we root our political organising in analyses which disregard gender, feminism can quickly get shrunk to a shadow of its formerly vibrant self."<sup>56</sup> These arguments culminated in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* (1989), which stood as Enloe's first systematic attempt to formulate a feminist theory of international relations. In the introduction, Enloe used the recently exposed Iran-Contra affair as a touchstone, considering what role women played in the scandal, as well as how it affected their everyday lives, not only in the U.S., but also throughout the Third World.<sup>57</sup> Again, then, analysis of a particular facet of U.S. intervention in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. pp. 170-172.

<sup>56</sup> Cynthia Enloe, "Bananas, Bases, and Patriarchy: Some Feminist Questions About the Militarization of Central America" in *Radical America* 19:4 (July-August 1985) pp. 7-8.

<sup>57</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* op cit pp. 7-11.

Central America was used to demonstrate the ways in which the politics of anti-interventionism and feminism were mutually reinforcing.

In spite of the obvious differences between Randall and Enloe – the first an activist and cultural worker favouring the political rhetoric of poetry and oral history, the second a professional scholar working within the disciplinary boundaries of the U.S. academy – their shared concern with the intersections of anti-interventionist and feminist political discourse sheds light on the intellectual context that formed *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story*. This becomes clearer when Enloe's involvement as an advisor in the production of *Witness to War: Dr. Charlie Clements* (Deborah Shaffer, 1985) is noted. Released eighteen months after *When the Mountains Tremble*, the film documents the story of a Vietnam veteran working as a doctor in rural El Salvador, and was produced by Skylight Pictures, with both Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel as crew. Enloe's role in the production goes some way towards demonstrating the overlapping contexts of activism, scholarship and filmmaking, born of the shift towards a consciously global women's movement, that existed within Central America solidarity circles, thereby highlighting the manner in which new ways of conceptualising the discourses of anti-interventionism and feminism percolated through the movement's culture, and helped to define the parameters of committed documentary practice.

### III.

Throughout the 1980s, radical film studies journal *Jump Cut* sought to draw its readers' attention to the existence of a large body of documentaries engaging with the politics of U.S. intervention in Central America, and often published reviews of little

known films and interviews with directors from the region.<sup>58</sup> In 1982, for example, the journal published an article by Julia Lesage in which the feminist film scholar and documentary filmmaker suggested that, when compared to the Vietnam era, the “alternative film and video work” of the 1980s seemed to be playing “an even more important role in political organisation, since there are considerably more films and tapes available now than there were in the earlier period.”<sup>59</sup> Entitled “For Our Urgent Use,” Lesage’s essay foregrounded the political use-value of the films in question, and ended by providing a list of distribution details for those interested in acquiring copies.

But Lesage also made a separate point about the variations in content that existed amongst the diverse approaches to activist documentary practice covered in her essay:

It may be that the omnibus film, which tries to explain history, life today in that country, U.S. foreign policy, the role of the Church, rural and urban life, revolutionary strategy, and so on, has itself become a predictable genre in solidarity media. More specific works that give both the detail and evocative connotations of daily life and ‘small’ events also have their place and may even have more emotional force.<sup>60</sup>

In this account, then, films were deemed politically preferable if they eschewed attempts to tell the “whole” story, and dismissed the idea of “balanced” or “objective”

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<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Peter Steven, “Oppression: *El Salvador, Revolution or Death*” in *Jump Cut* 26 (December 1981) pp. 20-21, and Julia Lesage, “Betamax and Super-8 in Revolutionary El Salvador: An Interview with Daniel Solis” in *Jump Cut* 29 (February 1984) pp. 15-18.

<sup>59</sup> Julia Lesage, “For Our Urgent Use: Films on Central America” originally published in *Jump Cut* 27 (July 1982) pp. 15-20, but quoted here from Peter Steven (ed.), *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics and Counter-Cinema* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1985) p. 375.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 384.

filmmaking in favour of a focus on a particular individual, locale, or event related to the history of U.S. intervention in Central America.

Whether under the auspices of major commercial and public television networks or independent production companies, U.S. filmmakers produced a vast amount of documentary material dealing with Central America in the years 1979-1992, the majority of which presented the region in the overarching “omnibus” style referred to by Lesage. *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story*, on the other hand, were exactly the type of films she sought to champion, because of the manner in which they challenged mainstream conceptions of documentary style. For this reason, their stylistic and rhetorical features distinguished *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story* from various competitor films. This is not to imply that the formal qualities of the two films were unprecedented within the history of U.S. filmmaking: as will be demonstrated, for example, they shared some stylistic traits with *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador*. However, when viewed in comparative perspective, it is clear that they succeeded in breaking with the established conventions of 1980s documentary in several explicitly *political* ways.

An instructive example of public television’s coverage of Central America against which to compare *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story* is a tetralogy of hour-long films screened as a part of PBS’s *Frontline* series in 1985, collectively titled *Crisis in Central America*. Although independent filmmakers shot the majority of material screened on *Frontline*, the show’s producers retained final editorial control over all of the content that it screened. As a consequence, every *Frontline* programme followed a formula that involved the use of third-person, omniscient narration, and adhered to a conventional norm maintaining “a clear



distinction between journalism and propaganda or advocacy.”<sup>61</sup> *Crisis in Central America* was no exception to these rules. The first episode in the series documented the region’s “Yankee Years,” from the Spanish-American War in 1898 through to the CIA-sponsored coup against Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. The other episodes detailed the contemporary political situations in Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador. Each programme used a third-person narrative framework, and foregrounded debates over whether or not U.S. intervention in Central America was part of a wider struggle to protect the Third World from the forces of monolithic communism. Interviews with U.S. diplomats and political exiles from the region, and stock footage from mainstream news coverage, were used to lend credence to the conclusions reached in the narration. Whilst different crews produced each episode they were all subject to the formal conventions of the *Frontline* “house style,” which meant that a supposedly *objective* approach to their subject matter formed the driving force behind the films’ collective narrative style.<sup>62</sup>

In contrast, Pamela Yates and Tom Sigel mobilised two distinct narrative tactics to actively foreground the political subjectivity of *When the Mountains Tremble*. First, the directors deployed re-enacted scenes to represent the historical context of U.S. involvement in Guatemala. Featuring in the opening ten minutes of the film, these scenes were shot in black and white with actors playing the roles of historical figures. One represented a conversation in 1954 between a U.S. diplomat and Jacobo Arbenz, who was then Guatemala’s second democratically elected president. In the scene, Arbenz suggests that his key political motivation is to convert

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<sup>61</sup> Bullert, *Public Television* p. xii and pp. 25-27.

<sup>62</sup> A reviewer for the *New York Times* backed up the series’ apparent neutrality by suggesting that “they provide no answer” to the question of U.S. responsibility for the region’s crises, instead expecting their viewers to “find it themselves”. See John Corry, “*Crisis in Central America* on PBS” in *New York Times* (April 9 1985) p. C-14.

Guatemala “from a semi-colonial, dependent nation into one that is free and independent,” and that, “the only problem between our nations is United Fruit”. The diplomat declares that, “the government of the United States is not going to permit a red Soviet republic between Texas and the Panama Canal.” The second scene, set shortly after the first at CIA Central Command in Florida, briefly depicts a CIA officer recruiting General Castillo Armas to lead a U.S.-backed coup at the head of a “movement for national liberation.”

By making the case that it was a CIA-backed operation undertaken to protect U.S. economic interests, the two scenes articulated an essentially revisionist interpretation of the 1954 coup that intersected with those established during the 1980s by historians Walter LaFeber and Gabriel Kolko. However, the function of the two scenes within the film’s narrative is also significant. In seeking to justify their inclusion in the face of a barrage of criticism, Yates suggested that,

to our way of thinking, in making films, the most important thing is to...reach an audience through the telling of a story. And that means, even in the documentary, taking certain dramatic liberties.<sup>63</sup>

These re-enacted scenes operate as a formal means of side stepping more conventional documentary practice in the hope of articulating a consciously politicised interpretation of Guatemalan history.

A similar dramatisation of subjectivity is evident in the choice of soundtrack for *When the Mountains Tremble*. At one point, the film details the emergence of a mass movement during the 1970s that brought workers and peasants together in

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<sup>63</sup> Rosenthal, “*When the Mountains Tremble*” p. 7. For evidence of mainstream media criticism of the film’s re-enacted scenes, see Vincent Canby, “Film: U.S. Policies in Nicaragua and Guatemala” in *New York Times* (January 18 1984) p. C-24 and Corry, “A PBS Documentary on Guatemala” p. C-14.

opposition to Guatemala's military junta. As footage documents a 1977 mineworkers' march from the nation's highlands to its capital, upbeat, celebratory music accompanies shots of mass demonstrations and political speeches. In this way, the protests are highlighted not only as a serious and worthy cause, but also as an example of the potentially liberating collective experience of political struggle. This optimistic tone ends abruptly, however, when the film cuts to a shot of a soldier in a gas mask, a transition that is accompanied by the introduction of looming, sombre music that contrasts sharply with that which came before it. The ensuing repression of the mineworkers' demonstration is brutal, and the film's use of music underlines the manner in which its producers were taking sides in the Guatemalan political crisis. Indeed, the same two compositions are used in a similar manner at various points in the film, thereby repeating the moving contrast between the people and the military in a musical refrain, and drawing attention to the consciously politicised orientation of the film's analysis.

The aesthetic qualities of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* also served to foreground their political subjectivity, albeit in markedly different ways. *When the Mountains Tremble* was shot on 16mm film, a lighter, cheaper and more portable stock than the alternative and more established 32mm. This choice of medium allowed the crew easier access to the remote regions in which the guerrillas of the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity movement (URNG) were based. However, cameraman Thomas Sigel also insisted that "luxuries" such as a tripod and radio microphones be included in the crew's equipment. This attention to detail ensured that it was possible to craft certain of the film's scenes with artistic

precision.<sup>64</sup> *When the Mountains Tremble* therefore contains a number of slow, lyrical tracking shots, which are often featured without additional sound or music. Much of the footage contained in the film is composed with considerable attention to colour, and in certain sequences the editing is almost impressionistic. The culmination of this carefully constructed visual style is the film's final scene, which features an extended shot of a young Quiche boy as he slowly walks through a field towards the camera, before turning to face it and stating, "Together, we will win." The manner in which the boy delivers this line directly to camera draws the film's audience into solidarity with the URNG by including them within the collective "we" that will emerge victorious from the movement's struggle. The scene therefore contributes to the film's unabashed foregrounding of political subjectivity, and, at the same time, highlights its links to the broader discourses of the Central America solidarity movement.

In contrast, *Maria's Story* was shot using a Sony Video-8 camera and betrays a markedly different visual style. Video had the benefit of being cheaper and even more mobile than 16mm film stock, and required less light for successful image capture. Its use in the perpetually underfunded world of U.S. documentary filmmaking therefore increased during the 1970s, as technological advances increased its reliability, and by the mid-1980s it was widely used.<sup>65</sup> Pamela Yates and Monona Wali, along with the film's cinematographer John Knoop, had originally intended to shoot with 16mm film until they realised it would be too unwieldy for use in the Salvadoran countryside. *Maria's Story* therefore owed its distinct visual characteristics to the advent of easily portable handheld video equipment.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> Jack C. Ellis and Betsy A. McLane, *A New History of Documentary Film* (London: Continuum, 2005) pp. 258-259.

<sup>66</sup> Riley, "Maria's Story: A Question of Passion" p. 6.

The aesthetic significance of these developments is most clearly demonstrated during a scene in which Maria's FMLN company comes under attack from the Salvadoran military. The crew is celebrating Christmas Eve with the guerrillas when an explosion rocks the gathering, causing Knoop to drop his camera. Unlike 16mm recording equipment in a similar situation, the Video-8 camera was able to continue shooting, and therefore captured the sound of numerous mortars falling on the camp. To give this affecting audio track more visual impact, Cohen and Wali chose to accompany it with images shot during a separate attack.<sup>67</sup> In breaking with complete fidelity to documentary authenticity in this way, the filmmakers highlighted the importance of video technology to their narrative through the use of audio that would not have been captured by a film camera. At the same time, the production of the scene made manifest another example of consciously subjective documentary style; unafraid to break with the norms of documentary practice, Cohen and Wali concerned themselves primarily with making a cogent political statement. Whilst the particular narrative styles of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* were by no means identical, then, the ways in which they defied convention by consciously drawing attention to their visual styles and blurred the line between documentary and drama illustrates their comparable political approaches to documenting the Central American revolutionary struggle.

Another feature that characterised much mainstream documentary filmmaking during the 1980s was an essayistic narrative style. One example of this type of filmmaking was *Making the News Fit* (Beth Sanders, 1987), which attempted to articulate an analogous form of media critique to that featured in *The Nation*. A

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<sup>67</sup> "Maria's Story and its Role in the Technological History of Documentary Filmmaking", <[www.kino-eye.com/2008/09/20/marias-story/](http://www.kino-eye.com/2008/09/20/marias-story/)> (accessed February 26 2010).

female narrator opens the film with the argument that, “The news media define much of our world; more than any other institution, they tell us what is true and what is false,” and asks whether mainstream journalists and foreign correspondents had, up until that point, produced “an accurate account” of the civil war in El Salvador. Indeed, the discursive links to the *The Nation* continue throughout the film, which uses interviews with Michael Massing, Raymond Bonner and Aryeh Naier – three press critics whose work featured regularly in the magazine during the 1980s – to ground its allegations of editorial bias at *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and other mainstream media outlets. Overall, then, whilst the film’s case against these institutions is convincing, *Making the News Fit*’s formal and rhetorical qualities were almost indistinguishable from those of a journalistic essay: in its opening scene, the film articulated a clear and precise argument, which it then sought to substantiate using interviews and stock footage that provided legitimation for the overarching claims of its voice-over narration.

*When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story*, on the other hand, replicate the rhetorical strategies of the “testimonio narrative,” a genre that rapidly rose to prominence in Latin American literary culture during the late Cold War. Literary critic John Beverley has defined the testimonio as:

a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or significant life experience.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 35:1 (Spring 1989) pp. 12-13.

Beverly notes that the author-narrators of testimonios tend to have political, rather than purely literary, ambitions for their texts, and that the development of the form was closely linked to the rise of anti-imperialist national liberation struggles in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution of 1959.<sup>69</sup>

One of the genre's most notable early proponents was Rigoberta Menchú, who first published *Ma Llamó Rigoberta Menchú Y Así Me Nació La Conciencia* in 1983. The text was very quickly translated into English and published as *I, Rigoberta Menchú* by Verso a year later, and has since risen to prominence in the U.S. based primarily on Menchú's receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, but also due to the significant controversy in literary and academic circles caused when the truth of its author's autobiographical claims were questioned by anthropologist David Stoll in 1999.<sup>70</sup> However, in order to understand the context in which the text emerged, as well as its subsequent importance for *When the Mountains Tremble*, it is important to remember that on its release, Menchú's book stood as "a call to conscience, a piece of wartime propaganda," designed to draw the attention of the world to atrocities being committed by the Guatemalan military and reinforced by Ronald Reagan's policies towards Central America.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, as Ana Patricia Rodriguez has noted, the text emerged as only the most notable example of a much broader culture of "testimonial narrative textuality" that served as "a historiographic record of neo-colonialism" for

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. pp. 13-14.

<sup>70</sup> Through detailed detective work, Stoll managed to prove that a) that Menchú had not witnessed the deaths of some of her relatives as she had claimed to have done, and b) that she had received an elementary school education in spite of having described herself as illiterate. See David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchú and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999). For a detailed summary of the imbroglio surrounding Stoll's book, see Arturo Arias (ed.), *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Greg Grandin and Francisco Goldman, "Bitter Fruit for Rigoberta" in *The Nation* (February 8 1999) p. 25.

communities throughout the isthmus.<sup>72</sup> When these factors are borne in mind, the contrapuntal structure of *When the Mountains Tremble* – in which shots of Menchú delivering her testimony in subtitled Spanish are interspersed with original documentary footage highlighting the history of late Cold War Guatemala – may be read as explicit markers of the film’s links to the testimonial narrative. The interweaving of Menchú’s personal story with a wider examination of Guatemalan politics also highlights her testimony’s status as the story of an *entire community*, another consistent feature of the genre. Indeed, Menchú herself makes this point when she categorically states, “I’m going to tell you my story, which is the story of all the Guatemalan people.”

A similar rhetorical style is evident in *Maria’s Story*. Along with interviews and conversations with her husband, the testimony provided by Maria serves to establish the details of her biography, and provides the film’s voice-over narration. As its title suggests, then, *Maria’s Story* intends to tell Maria’s *personal* story, in which she bears witness to the realities of everyday life as an FMLN combatant. However, her account also stands for something larger, as she makes clear in her final statement to camera:

The reason I decided to be a part of this film was to explain our reality to the North American people, and other people who may not understand it. In this revolution, as you can see, we all participate. So I feel a little embarrassed because I’m playing a role that belongs to everybody... We all work together, everyone, every minute of our life.

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<sup>72</sup> Ana Patricia Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) pp. 76-77.



In tying their narratives to the testimonio, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* avoid relying on talking heads to give credit to a central argument running throughout the film (the essayistic narrative style identified above). Instead, they focus on the stories of individual women in order to paint a broader, but also more personal, political portrait of revolutionary struggle.

In this way, the films aligned themselves with a distinctly Central American form of story-telling. But what were the *political* implications of such shifts in narrative style? First, the foregrounding of subjectivity enacted by *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* highlighted the manner in which the films were consciously *taking sides* in a debate over U.S. counterrevolutionary intervention in Central America. Second, in adopting the rhetorical style of the testimonial genre, they succeeded in opening up a discursive space in which the potential links between anti-interventionist and feminist political agendas could be articulated.<sup>73</sup> This meant that Menchú and Serrano, as the primary subjects of *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story*, were given the opportunity to use their positions within the narratives of the two films to represent themselves as articulate subaltern subjects.

The pitfalls of drawing such a conclusion too quickly have been adequately highlighted by, amongst others, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who, in her now famous 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", provided a negative assessment of the ability of subaltern subjects to provide authentic representations of themselves within the

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<sup>73</sup> In making this point, it is necessary to note the "strong female-gender orientation" of the testimonial genre, and the manner in which it has been used by Latin American authors to document the politics of sexual as well as neocolonial oppression. On this topic, see Linda S. Maier, "The Case for and case History of Women's Testimonial Literature in Latin America" in Linda S. Maier and Isabel Dulfano (eds.), *Woman as Witness: Essays on Testimonial Literature by Latin American Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) p. 2.

parameters provided by Western political discourse.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, it is important to highlight the similarities in narrative style between *When the Mountains Tremble*, *Maria's Story* and the films analysed in Chapter 5. The makers of *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* all chose to centre their stories around the experiences of individual protagonists, in order to romanticise their positions within the drama of the revolutions taking place in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and to avoid challenging U.S. audiences accustomed to this type of narrative. In basing their narratives on the stories of Rigoberta Menchú and Maria Serrano, then, the films under analysis in this chapter were by no means unique within the cultural networks of the solidarity movement, or of U.S. filmmaking more generally. Indeed, as Pamela Cohen has argued, the “personal portrait” provided by *Maria's Story* was praised by solidarity activists because of the way it “helped them reach a broader circle of folks in their education, outreach and advocacy work.”<sup>75</sup> Whilst their consciously politicised narrative styles did not escape certain mainstream conventions, and they were not able to overcome the contradictions inherent in providing representations of subaltern subjects, then, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* successfully adapted the form of documentary filmmaking as a way of bringing the observations of feminism and anti-interventionism together.

#### IV.

A common trait that links *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* is that whilst neither of the films' protagonists self-identify at any point as feminists, their stories were filmed by documentary filmmakers with political intentions informed by

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<sup>74</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Greenberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) p. 288.

<sup>75</sup> Author's personal email correspondence with Pamela Cohen (August 28 2010).

the politicised culture of global feminism. As a result, Pamela Cohen has recently suggested that:

*Maria's Story*, by virtue of its subject, is a feminist film. We made a very conscious choice that our protagonist be a woman. We, the producers and directors, are women. We never waved it as a flag, but of course it was an intention of ours. Maria, at that time, wasn't thinking of herself as a feminist, but of course in our interviews we raised questions about her being a woman and about being in the position she was in the FMLN.<sup>76</sup>

Both films dramatise strands of anti-interventionist discourse – such as critique of the portrayal of Central America by the mainstream media, and direct comparison between U.S. intervention in the region and the Vietnam War – which are also present in *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador*. However, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* also move beyond this discourse to place significant emphasis on the gendered dimensions of revolutionary struggle in Guatemala and El Salvador. Therefore, it is important to examine how the films were able to capitalise on their formal and rhetorical strategies to articulate a distinct brand of feminist anti-interventionism.

*When the Mountains Tremble* explicitly dramatises the difficulties faced by women under a military regime through the representation of a “Miss Guatemala Pageant”, at which a group of women clad in swimsuits are paraded before a crowd of smartly dressed men, some of whom are U.S. businessmen. As the contestants arrive on the stage, an announcer tells the men, “The Guatemalan woman greets you with love and devotion,” before asking several of the women questions as a part of the competition. Two white participants arrive on stage in the traditional clothes of

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

Guatemalan indigenous groups as they read out patronising details about the “tribes” they are representing. The women are clearly sexualised, and, in the case of those in native dress, expected to emphasise the eroticisation of indigenous culture. To provide a contrast to the beauty pageant, the film cuts to an interview with an indigenous woman, who, as if in direct response to the spectacle, indignantly states: “The government uses us when it is in their interest. They exhibit us in our native dress as though we were in a zoo...the army and the rich consider us unskilled brutes who don’t know anything.” In dramatising the contrast between the high-spirited scenes of the beauty pageant and the woman’s raw anger, the film performs a critique of the manner in which Guatemalan culture has become sexualised by American business presence. By integrating the most superficial of rituals to give pleasure to their U.S. patrons, the country’s elite has subordinated its women to the status of spectacle, trapped in this position by a repressive political system.

This idea is reinforced when a group of indigenous women are shown talking to a guerrilla leader. He asks those who have been raped by members of the armed forces to raise their hands, and the majority do so, thereby examining the vicious basis of military rule. *Maria’s Story* also dramatises a similar critique of the Salvadoran army. Early in the film, for example, Maria discusses the death of her eldest daughter Ceci, and confides to the camera that at the moment she realised Ceci was dead, “I’ve never felt so much rage. Not so much because they killed her, because we are making a war, them against us, us against them. But because after killing her, they stripped and mutilated her.” In representing the armed forces, then, both films portray the ruling order as viciously misogynistic, and inherently tied to a system of patriarchy that views rape and gruesome violence as a legitimate means of waging war.

*When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* also demonstrate the important role played by women's domestic labour in bringing them to political consciousness. Reflecting on her life before becoming politically active, Maria states:

I was a peasant, the wife of a peasant farmer. I did house work: grind corn, iron, wash, sow, go to mass. But that life allowed me to see many unjust things. The poor, always forgotten, and all their possibilities limited. Some people with absolutely nothing. That inequality and poverty is what made me decide to leave that life.

After experiencing this form of work, and forging a sense of solidarity with other poor women, Maria describes how she decided to join a peasants' union in order to bring about political and economic change. In detailing the life of her mother in *When the Mountains Tremble*, Rigoberta Menchú tells a similar story: "My mother had to go to work as a servant in the capital to support our family. In the city she experienced even worse discrimination than in the country. But there she also met poor non-Indians whose living conditions were terrible, just like ours." This process of coming to consciousness led Menchú's mother to join with other servants to organise their opposition to the ruling order: again, direct experience of the traditional life of working-class women is portrayed as a necessary step in the journey towards the realisation that society could be changed for the better through resistance. Whilst neither of these stories is told in the explicit language of feminism, the filmmakers frame them in such a way as to emphasise the gendered dimensions of the transformations that took place in the lives of their subjects.

In a similar vein to the work of feminist International Relations scholar Cynthia Enloe, the films also explore the impact of guerrilla warfare on the lives of female combatants. The final third of *When the Mountains Tremble* is filmed almost entirely in a Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) camp, and it soon

becomes clear that women are an important sector of that community. At one point, a female guerrilla speaks to a large group of women and argues that their participation in the revolution is just as important as that of their husbands, sons and brothers:

Compañeros, we are far from our homes. The children are suffering the most. So we must fight for our kids. The men have to join the war, and the women have to join the war. Follow the example of our many fighting friends. We women must not stay at home. We can do more than make tortillas. Now is the time for us women to use our brains.

These arguments for sexual equality are backed up by the comments of two young URNG recruits, who affirm that their male counterparts treat them as equals and that they consequently feel a sense of liberation through their participation in the revolution. One even goes so far as to suggest that this could be a permanent feature of life in the new Guatemala: “Up here, we’ve learned better ways to live, and when we win, and go back to our villages, we’ll live even better, since it will be easier there.” In presenting this point of the view, directors Yates and Sigel engage the question, also posed by Enloe in *Does Khaki Become You?*, as to whether gender equality amongst revolutionaries can be sustained in the aftermath of a successful guerrilla war, and, by offering a tentatively positive answer, posit the Guatemalan struggle as a struggle not only against social inequality and U.S. interventionism, but also against patriarchal social forms.

In her role as a mid-level FMLN combatant, Maria Serrano exemplifies the liberated female guerrilla. Her marriage to husband José breaks with conventional gender stereotypes, in that she is a fighter whilst he works behind the lines in the FMLN supply chain. Speaking about their marriage, José asserts “in a relationship, anything can happen. If it’s not the husband who leaves and joins up first, it’s the

wife. In our case Maria broke away first!” In this account, José does not try to excuse the fact that he is not a combatant, but, rather, embraces the route Maria has taken into the guerrilla army. Maria also reflects philosophically on her status: “If someone had told me ten years ago that I would be sitting planning military strategy, or even carrying a gun, I would never have believed it. But just to survive, I’ve learned to do so many things I never imagined to I could do.” She therefore thinks of her role in the FMLN as a fact of life, a necessity brought about by the inequality and repression she experienced whilst performing domestic labour. She is liberated from the drudgery of domestic labour, but has not lost her femininity: her thirteen year-old daughter Minita talks of feeling her mother’s “support” every day, and Maria herself admits that when the war is over, “I’m going to change these old boots for the shoes of a lady.”

In these various ways, then, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria’s Story* argue that participation in guerrilla struggle has positively transformed the lives of many women, in spite of the sacrifices and hardship involved. The films highlight the dialectic that existed in the relationship between women’s treatment under the Guatemalan and Salvadoran military regimes – where they were sexualised objects, and the subjects of gruesome sexual violence as a form of political repression – and their comparative liberation after joining the revolution. Whilst life with the guerrillas is not overtly romanticised in the dramatic manner of *Under Fire* or *Latino*, these documentaries posit that a change in gender relations can only come as a part of an upheaval of broader social relations relating to economic equality and democratic freedom. In doing so, they functioned as propaganda for the Guatemalan and Salvadoran revolutions, but they also represented a marked tendency in the solidarity movement to find new and productive relationships between the politics of feminism and anti-interventionism.

## V.

The different films examined in Section III of this thesis formed a specific brand of political filmmaking oriented towards anti-interventionist engagement with U.S. policy in Central America. They bridged the divide between dramatic and documentary narrative styles, and, whilst *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador* were produced at the margins of the Hollywood system, *When the Mountains Tremble* and *Maria's Story* were made by filmmakers who divided their time between producing material for mainstream TV networks such as CBS, and shooting more radical documentaries aimed at the solidarity movement. Those in charge of the films' production had to find innovative ways of financing their projects within a media landscape that was, on the whole, hostile to political filmmaking that challenged the status quo. The films also succeeded in making use of alternative distribution networks provided by activist groups such as CISPES, which meant that they could be used as educational and propaganda tools at the same time as they gained accolades as politicised cultural works.

All five films grappled to different extents with important questions of narrative form and aesthetic style, and sought to adapt the conventions of mainstream filmmaking to provide a critique of U.S. policy in Central America. Overall, then, the anti-interventionist filmmaking analysed above demonstrated the potential for overlap between political filmmaking and activist politics during the 1980s, and provided a disparate group of cultural radicals with the opportunity to negotiate the legacies of the 1960s New Left by producing forthright and deeply affecting films that, in several cases, reached a wider audience than the journalism and scholarship examined in Sections I and II. In this sense, they made a significant contribution to the politicised cultural formation that developed alongside the 1980s anti-interventionist movement,



and offered a variety of opportunities for wider audiences to engage with the culture of protest that emerged in opposition to Reagan administration policies in Central America.

## Conclusion

### Cultural Legacies of Central America Solidarity

Whatever the American left might be, it will to some extent be what it was, and that is at least one source of its strength, however otherwise it manifests itself.

Michael E. Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (2009)<sup>1</sup>

This thesis has used the methods of cultural and social movement history to reconstruct the vibrant nexus of anti-interventionist scholarship, journalism and filmmaking that helped underpin the political activism of the 1980s U.S. Central America solidarity movement. As the chapters above demonstrate, during the period 1979-1992 a wide range of cultural radicals were drawn together by a common conviction that U.S. intervention in Central America needed to be vigorously opposed. Building on this, they found a variety of ways to make intellectual and cultural endeavours directly relevant to the anti-interventionist movement. Each of the examples of politicised cultural production examined also wrestled with the legacies of the 1960s New Left, seeking to update the movement's propositions for a new and challenging period, as American radicals struggled against a rising tide of conservative politics, financial deregulation, incipient deunionisation and militaristic foreign policy. Ultimately, as it became more difficult for the left to raise the "labour question" in the contemporary political arena, a variety of new social movements

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<sup>1</sup> Michael E. Brown, *The Historiography of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009) p. 181.

emerged in an attempt to keep oppositional politics alive, and, where possible, roll back the agenda of the Reagan and Bush administrations. The Central America solidarity movement was a key sector in this struggle, and, in using their intellectual and cultural work to contribute to its cause, each of the individuals and institutions examined in this thesis played an important role not only in representing the movement's political processes, but also in helping to shape them.

As is natural within a cultural formation as wide-ranging as this, not all of its constituents agreed on every strategic question. One of the key issues for debate was that of audience: to whom should oppositional political culture aim to speak? For some, such as historian Walter LaFeber and the makers of *Under Fire*, *Latino* and *Salvador*, the answer was, at least in part, that it should target as broad an audience as possible, irrespective of political orientation. To others, such as the editorial collective at the *Guardian*, it was more important to target specific activist communities. Another key issue was how to best mobilise opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America. The editorial board at *The Nation*, for example, preferred to give significant space to those intellectuals and journalists who prioritised a legal-constitutional approach to activism, whereas the authors involved in Verso Books' U.S. projects emphasised the need for grass-roots mobilisation in explicit solidarity with the region's revolutionary struggles as the only way to mount effective opposition. In spite of these strategic differences, it is important to think of the intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers examined in this thesis as a coherent bloc of cultural radicals who ultimately played a crucial role in publicising the anti-interventionist cause, and challenging the legitimacy of the conservative forces that dominated the American political system during the 1980s.

More than three decades after the culmination of the Nicaraguan revolution, what are the cultural legacies of the U.S. Central America solidarity movement that developed in its wake? Since the end of the Cold War, several notable supporters of the region's revolutionary struggles have provided one answer to this question by publically articulating their disillusionment with the anti-interventionist traditions of the U.S. left, and, in the case of intellectual and critic Paul Berman, the roots of this disillusionment can be found in writings on the Nicaraguan revolution from the 1980s. Born in 1949, Berman became involved in the 1960s New Left during the course of his undergraduate degree at Columbia University.<sup>2</sup> He dabbled with anarchism during the 1970s, but by the time he came to report on U.S. policy in Nicaragua during the 1980s, had begun to question the politics and culture of the New Left.

Nonetheless, Berman was not indifferent to the fate of Central American revolutionary struggle; he still regarded himself as on the left, and continued to write for left-wing publications such as *Mother Jones* and *Dissent* throughout the decade, first travelling to Nicaragua in 1985 at the invitation of *Mother Jones* editor Adam Hochschild. His initial report appeared in the February-March 1986 issue of the magazine, and sought to tell the story of the revolution from the perspective of "the Nicaraguan rank and file."<sup>3</sup> Berman turned his colourful prose style to focus on the contradictions of the Sandinista government and the society it was attempting to refashion. In certain passages, the journalist demonstrated his sympathy for the revolution by summing up the feelings of many U.S. activists. Describing the city of

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<sup>2</sup> For biographical details of Berman, see Alan Johnson, "Interrogating Terror and Liberalism: An Interview with Paul Berman" in *Democratiya* 5 (Summer 2006) pp. 111-113.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Berman, "Rocking Chairs, Roosters and Revolution: Exploring Nicaragua's Neighborhoods" in *Mother Jones* (February-March 1986) p. 21.

Estelí, for example, he enthused: “If you have even the slightest feeling for social justice, then the sight of that ancient cowboy city in the aftermath of its glorious proletarian insurrection of nearly seven years ago can’t help but stir a few embers of natural solidarity.”<sup>4</sup> He followed a familiar line by excoriating a U.S. embassy official he interviewed for being convinced that the new Nicaragua was a “Stalinist tyranny...run for personal gain – and an unpopular one at that”, suggesting that these conservative mantras were simply not born out by any evidence.<sup>5</sup> However, Berman did not ignore what he deemed to be the Sandinistas’ inconsistencies, arguing that their adherence to Marxism-Leninism seemed to be “forty years behind the times.” He also emphasised what he saw as the mistrust of Soviet influence in Nicaragua amongst even those sectors of its society that had staunchly supported the overthrow of Somoza.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, then, Berman framed his article as a challenge to both the Reagan administration and those on the left who would not brook any criticism of the Sandinistas.

Berman maintained this line in his second *Mother Jones* report, dated December 1986, but this time built into his reportage a critique of the Central America solidarity movement. Attempting to explain why the revolution was so attractive to U.S. leftists, he suggested a re-periodisation of the history of the 1960s:

Paris and Berkeley were obviously not, in retrospect, the world centers of the New Left. The uprisings at Columbia and the Sorbonne were not the crucial university rebellions. Backwater Nicaragua was the world center of the New Left...Elsewhere,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 23.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 24-27.

the dream of Che led to stupid posturing. In León, the dream of Che was the road to the ministry of the interior. Fantasy elsewhere was reality in Nicaragua.<sup>7</sup>

Berman argued that the U.S. New Left and the Sandinistas shared both an inherent suspicion of the proletarian leftism of the Depression era and an opposition to orthodox communist parties, common traits that caused sixties radicals to romanticise revolutionary Nicaragua. However, he also suggested that these affinities led those wedded to anti-interventionism to ignore the Sandinistas' anti-democratic policies, encapsulated in close ties to the USSR and rigid press censorship. Ultimately, this meant that the U.S. left sought to praise the Sandinistas whilst ignoring, amongst other things, the fact that for urban wageworkers, real income had declined during the course of the revolution, and was perhaps even lower in 1986 than it had been under Somoza.<sup>8</sup> Even though he concluded the article by insisting that Nicaragua was by no means an "authentic terror state" when compared with others in the region, Berman had undoubtedly aimed a direct shot across the bow of a significant swathe of anti-interventionist opinion, and managed to stir up considerable controversy in the process.<sup>9</sup>

In the years after the end of the Cold War, Berman has become a leading liberal critic of the anti-interventionist left, writing several books analysing the legacies of the 1960s. His book *A Tale of Two Utopias* (1996), for example, examined what he described as the two ideological utopias that dictated the course of left thinking during the late Cold War: the worldwide political upheavals of 1968, and the

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Berman, "Nicaragua 1986: Notes on the Sandinista Revolution" in *Mother Jones* (December 1986) pp. 20-22.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> In the February-March 1987 issue of *Mother Jones*, for example, the editors printed eleven letters engaging with Berman's articles, and debate continued in the magazine's pages for a number of months. See "Bravos and Boos for Berman" in *Mother Jones* (February-March 1987) pp. 2-5.

fall of communism in Russia and Eastern Europe in 1989. The “invisible aftermath” of the 1960s, he argued, created a shift in thinking amongst the majority of “68ers”, who turned their backs on direct democracy and revolutionary socialism in order to embrace political liberalism, either in its social-democratic or free market forms. In most cases, Berman argued, leftists reconciled themselves to Western-style political institutions: the “imaginary” revolutions of 1968 were rejected in favour of the “real” revolutions of 1989.<sup>10</sup> Buried within this macroscopic analysis of trends in international left thinking was a more specific critique of the “anti-anticommunism” of the U.S. New Left, as represented in the opposition to Cold War ideology and the war in Vietnam spearheaded by groups such as SDS and SNCC. In Berman’s reading, the New Left’s failure to embrace a robust anti-Stalinism meant that it inevitably tended towards the “culture of criminal leftism” embraced by the Weather Underground and various other Maoist and Marxist-Leninist sects in the years after 1968.<sup>11</sup>

In this account, to have stood in solidarity with revolutions such as those that swept Central America during the period was to have been on the wrong side of history, a line of thought originating in Berman’s writings on the Nicaraguan revolution and his critical engagement with 1980s anti-interventionism. Indeed, Berman has been joined as a key proponent of post-9/11 liberal interventionism by other intellectuals who were once closely associated with the U.S. left, such as Ronald Radosh and Christopher Hitchens.<sup>12</sup> In making their respective journeys towards

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Berman, *A Tale of Two Utopias: The Political Journey of the Generation of 1968* (New York: WW. Norton, 1996) pp. 14-16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 92-93.

<sup>12</sup> For an account of intellectual rationale provided by these “liberal hawks” for the 2003 invasion of Iraq, see Maria Ryan, “Bush’s ‘Useful Idiots’: 9/11, the Liberal Hawks and the Cooption of the ‘War on Terror’” in *Journal of American Studies* 45:4 (November 2011) pp. 695-716.

disillusionment with anti-interventionism, these prominent figures highlight one potential lesson provided by the fate of the Central America solidarity movement: that the 1960s New Left ultimately proved the inadequacy of its worldview through its response to political upheaval in the region, and that by the end of the Cold War, anti-interventionism as a social and political force was simply not worth taking seriously.<sup>13</sup>

However, it is also possible to discern several alternative legacies of the intellectual and cultural work that emerged in response to U.S. policy in Central America during the 1980s. For example, several of the directors examined in Section III of this thesis have continued to make politically engaged films that seek to challenge U.S. policy in Latin America. In 2003, Oliver Stone released his first documentary, *Commandante*, which was co-funded by HBO and three Cuban companies, again demonstrating the director's ability to operate within the margins of the Hollywood system. The film consists of a series of interviews with Fidel Castro, interspersed with footage of major events in the history of revolutionary and post-revolutionary Cuba. The narrative is sympathetic to the Cuban leader's political cause, and Stone is keen to highlight the propagandistic nature of the majority of his coverage in the mainstream American media. Building on this production, in 2009 Stone worked with radical intellectual Tariq Ali and left-liberal economist Mark Weisbrot to produce *South of the Border*, an ambitious and highly partisan attempt to

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<sup>13</sup> For increasingly more critical coverage of the Nicaraguan revolution by Radosh, see Ronald Radosh, "At First Glance" in *Dissent* (Fall 1983) pp. 403-404, "Darkening Nicaragua" in *The New Republic* (October 24, 1983) pp. 7-12 and "Nicaragua Revisited" in *The New Republic* (August 3, 1987) pp. 20-22. For Radosh's own account of the role of time spent in Nicaragua on his turn away from the anti-interventionist left, see Ronald Radosh, *Commies: A Journey Through the Old Left, the New Left and the Leftover Left* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2001) pp. 173-196, and for an instructive comparison between the intellectual journeys of Radosh and fellow ex-New Leftists Todd Gitlin and David Horowitz, see Jason Daniel Roberts, "Disillusioned Radicals: The Intellectual Odyssey of Todd Gitlin, Ronald Radosh and David Horowitz" (PhD Dissertation, George Washington University, 2007). Hitchens's forthright engagement with 1980s anti-interventionism in *The Nation* is covered in Chapter 3 of this thesis, and his own account of his political evolution is contained in Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22: A Memoir* (London: Atlantic Books, 2010).



discredit mainstream media presentation of radical Latin American politicians such as Hugo Chavez, Evo Morales and Rafael Correa. Furthermore, feminist documentary filmmaker Pamela Yates has recently directed *Granito* (2011), which returns to the material covered by her 1983 film *When the Mountains Tremble*, and narrates the experiences of several individuals whose lives were disrupted by the Guatemalan civil war. At one level, then, these films demonstrate how several of the cultural radicals discussed in the chapters above have retained their interest in Latin American politics, and have continued to mobilise the anti-interventionist rhetoric developed by the 1960s New Left and modified by the Central America solidarity movement.

Another illuminating and recent example of the impact of 1980s anti-interventionism on the trajectory of post-1960s U.S. radical politics comes in a posthumously published memoir by Peter Camejo, entitled *North Star* (2010). Camejo, who died in 2008 at the age of 68, had a long career as a political activist of various stripes, cutting his teeth as an organiser in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), before becoming a pioneer of socially responsible investing, cofounding the California Green Party in 1991, and running as Ralph Nader's vice presidential candidate in the 2004 presidential elections. Alongside these important episodes, in his memoir Camejo highlights the manner in which his engagement with the Central America solidarity movement provided a crucial experience in the development of his political thinking. He arrived in Nicaragua as a representative of the SWP shortly after the fall of Somoza in 1979, and was overcome with enthusiasm:

Nicaragua was alive as the revolution worked to organise people: new unions were springing up, Sandinista-run ministries were forming, the army was consolidating and

making sure there was food, running water, and transportation for the people. The FLSN leaders must have been working twenty hours a day.<sup>14</sup>

Back in the U.S., however, Camejo became increasingly distant from the SWP leadership, which was not prepared to give the Sandinistas the whole-hearted support he believed they deserved. Ultimately, Nicaragua provided the “tipping point” that led Camejo to leave the party, with the realisation that its factionalism and orientation towards arcane theoretical debates was preventing it from standing in solidarity with an important indigenous struggle for equality and freedom from U.S. interventionism:

While the rest of the left of the 1960s and 1970s was in decline throughout Latin America, caught up in the rhetoric of European Marxism and the influence of Stalinism, the FSLN had delivered a great victory for freedom. I thought about the United States – the great traditions of our struggles for justice, our symbols, our language – and how disconnected the left was from that reality.<sup>15</sup>

Camejo subsequently became closely involved with CISPES,<sup>16</sup> and his memories of the period underscore the solidarity movement’s importance as a bulwark of “connected criticism” for the U.S. left during a period in which the traditional bases of radical politics, most notably the labour movement, experienced extreme marginalisation. In direct opposition to the narrative of disillusionment provided by Berman, Camejo’s experiences demonstrate the signal importance of the links between the 1960s New Left and the Central America solidarity movement, and therefore help to highlight the significance of the cultural work discussed in this thesis in maintaining a critical counter-public strenuously opposed to the political status quo of the 1980s.

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Camejo, *North Star: A Memoir* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010) p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 179-180.

A final example of the continuing impact of the period's anti-interventionist thought and culture can be seen in the work of a younger generation of intellectuals and activists, those with no personal memory of the 1960s, and who came to political consciousness as a consequence of involvement in the solidarity movement. Discussing his life and work in a wide-ranging interview in 2004, for example, Michael Hardt suggested that visits to Central America during the 1980s were vital to the development of his intellectual and political outlook. Hardt, who has become an important figure within the contemporary alter-globalisation movement after a series of influential collaborations with Antonio Negri,<sup>17</sup> went on to suggest that there were two groups that travelled to the region to engage in political activism. The first consisted of those who went "out of their guilt", to "sacrifice in order to help others who were less privileged". The second group, to which Hardt thought he belonged, "never really imagined that they did much good" for the societies they visited, but instead sought to find "a better way to live". Hardt recollected:

I remember a group of Salvadoran students sitting me down...and saying, 'look, it's certainly sweet that you're here and that you're trying to help and everything, but what would really do us the most good is if you went back to the U.S. and made revolution there.' It was right in the middle of the Reagan years, and I thought, 'Oh my God. They don't realise how hard that is.' But what they were telling me was exactly right.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State-Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005); *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> Harry Kreisler, "Empire: A Conversation with Michael Hardt, March 12 2004" <<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people4/Hardt/hardt-con0.html>> (accessed 23 March, 2009).

Indeed, Hardt's recollections of his time in Central America as a young activist are echoed, albeit in a very different context, in a recent memoir by author Deb Olin Unferth, entitled *Revolution* (2011). The book narrates the story of Unferth's travels throughout the region with a boyfriend in 1987, as the couple looked for "revolution jobs" in Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador. One of the text's central motifs is Unferth and her boyfriend's continual rejection by Central American leftists, along with the vast majority of the "internacionalistas" they meet on their travels: in fact, every revolutionary group they attempted to join allowed them to "hang around for a few weeks" but then forced them to leave.<sup>19</sup> Unferth hints at the reasons for this rejection when she details a conversation with a priest in El Salvador: "The priest was talking about the United States, and I stopped listening. I knew what he was going to say, and what was I going to do about it? I accepted the blame. On behalf of my country I apologized."<sup>20</sup> Like Hardt, then, Unferth was ultimately confronted by her powerlessness as a North American leftist in Central America. Nonetheless, her travels in the region formed an important foundation for the development of her political identity. For example, Unferth discusses her first experiences of feminism in Nicaragua, where she was "awakened" after witnessing women soldiers fighting against the Contras, and after meeting lone female travellers who taught her a fierce sense of independence.<sup>21</sup> Like Hardt, then, whose realisation of his own powerlessness in the region ultimately led him back to the U.S. and towards attempts to theorise a new kind of oppositional movement, Unferth's view of

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<sup>19</sup> Deb Olin Unferth, *Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011) p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 76.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

the world was profoundly shaped by her engagement with the politics and culture of 1980s anti-interventionism.

The contemporary legacies of the intellectual and cultural radicalism examined in this thesis are therefore complex, multivalent, and perhaps even contradictory. Whilst engagement with the Central America solidarity movement ultimately led figures such as Paul Berman away from the traditions of the anti-interventionist left and towards a liberal interventionism that has provided legitimization for the so-called “War on Terror”, others, such as Peter Camejo, used the movement to negotiate some of the pitfalls of 1960s New Leftism. Finally, it is also clear that 1980s anti-interventionism provided an important political education for a younger generation of leftists. Ultimately, then, these legacies lend credence to the central claim of this thesis: that the work of the intellectuals, journalists and filmmakers who aligned themselves with the U.S. Central America solidarity movement between 1979 and 1992 were both culturally and politically significant, not only in terms of the role they played in representing and stimulating opposition to U.S. policy in Central America, but also because of the links their cultural radicalism provided between the 1960s New Left and contemporary forms of oppositional politics.

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